Of Mice and Men Study Guide

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The story begins with George and Lennie arriving at a small pond after a long day's walk, where they rest before heading to the nearby ranch where they are contracted to start work. George discovers that Lennie has been keeping a dead mouse in his pocket, stroking it as he walked. George makes Lennie throw the mouse away, and then to keep him from getting too sad, tells him the story of their dream – how they'll save enough money, a "stake", to set themselves up on a small independent farm. Lennie becomes particularly excited when George comes to his favorite part of the story – the part where Lennie gets to take care of the farm's rabbits. Conversation also reveals Lennie's history of violence and George's resentment that his life is dominated by watching out for him.

The next day, Lennie and George start at the ranch, where they are introduced to the boss, old-timer Candy and his elderly dog, respected lead hand Slim, ranch hands Carlson and Whitney, the boss's arrogant son Curley, and Curley's flirtatious wife. Conversations reveal that the short-tempered Curley is always looking to pick fights, that his wife is a flirt, that Slim's dog has just had a litter of pups, and that Carlson dislikes Candy's aged dog and is eager to have him put down. As everyone goes to dinner, George and Lennie linger, with George warning Lennie not to say anything that might antagonize Curley, and adding that if he (Lennie) behaves, he might be able to adopt one of the pups.

That night, Lennie brings one of the pups to the bunkhouse, and George tells him angrily to take it back to the barn. After he goes, George tells Slim some of Lennie's history – how he and George had to leave the town where they were previously working because Lennie scared a girl when he touched her dress. Meanwhile, Carlson convinces Candy that it's time to put his dog down, and Candy allows him to take the dog out and shoot it. After Slim goes out to help with the horses and after Lennie returns, conversation between George and Lennie about their dream farm leads Candy to offer his savings to help them buy it, as long as he can come and live with them. George agrees. Shortly afterwards, Curley comes and picks a fight with Lennie, who becomes frightened, grabs his fist, and crushes it to a pulp. Everyone agrees to keep secret what happened.

The next day, Lennie is in the barn mourning the death of his pup, which he accidentally killed when he tried to discipline it. His grieving is interrupted by the arrival of Curley's wife, who complains that she's lonely and then tells Lennie stories about how badly she's been treated all her life. She also lets him touch the softness of her hair, but becomes scared when he holds too tightly to it. In his efforts to calm her down, Lennie accidentally kills her, and then flees, afraid of what George will say. When the body is discovered, everyone (including George) realizes that she was killed by Lennie. Curley leads the men on a search, vowing to shoot Lennie on sight. George heads out on his own and finds Lennie sitting quietly by the pond where they rested before traveling to the ranch. Lennie apologizes for making George angry, but George tells him everything's all right, and then starts telling him the story of the farm. As Lennie is

becoming increasingly happy, George pulls out Carlson's gun and shoots him. Curley and the others come running and are glad that Lennie is no longer a danger, but only Slim realizes just what George has done, and he takes him for a quiet, private drink.

Pages 1 - 16

Summary

A brief, poetically written introduction describes the flow of the Salinas River and a site by a pool formed in the shallows of that river where traveling hoboes often sit. Narration describes the arrival there of two men – the small, sharp-boned and sharp-tongued George, and the large, strong but dull-witted Lennie. As they settle down to rest after a long walk, George reminds the forgetful Lennie that they are on their way to get jobs, how they were forced to leave their previous job when Lennie got them into trouble (as usual, George says), and how, in order to keep the new jobs, Lennie has to do exactly what George says. Lennie agrees. As they talk, George realizes that Lennie is concealing something from him – a small dead mouse, kept in his pocket where he can easily pet it. George angrily demands that Lennie give him the mouse, and when Lennie does, he throws it to the other side of the pond. George then complains about how he'd be living a good life if he didn't have to take care of Lennie all the time and sends Lennie off to look for firewood.

Lennie returns, having found the body of the mouse. George makes him give it up, and again throws it away, referring to how Lennie kept accidentally killing the mice given to him by his (now dead) Aunt Clara. Lennie sadly says the mice were just too small, and that he's looking forward to getting the rabbits that, conversation reveals, George has seemingly promised him. As the sun starts to set, George prepares to heat them up some beans for dinner. When Lennie says he likes his beans with ketchup, George's temper explodes. He complains again, but at greater length, about how much trouble it is to take care of Lennie. He talks about the trouble that Lennie got them into in Weed by wanting to just touch a pretty girl's dress, leading the girl to cry for help, leading to the two men having to leave town. After George falls silent, Lennie offers to go live in the hills and leave him alone. George says he was just joking, suggesting that they should maybe find Lennie a pup to take care of, since pups are tougher than mice. Lennie then asks him to tell a familiar story, and after a while George agrees.

George starts his story by talking about the lives of traveling ranch hands like them (and how he and Lennie are going to be different). They're going to save their pay and build up a "stake" with which they'll buy a ranch of their own, and … then Lennie excitedly interrupts. Knowing the story as well as he does, he remembers this is the part where George talks about them raising rabbits, and about how Lennie will be allowed to take care of them. At that point, the beans are ready to eat, and the two men have their supper. As they eat, George says that if anything happens, if Lennie should get them into trouble, he's to come right back to this spot and wait for George to come and get him. Lennie promises to do that, and the two men settle down for the night.

Analysis

Of Mice and Men has long been regarded as a literary classic and has been adapted several times into other media – film, theatre. There are a few possible reasons for both its success and its longevity. First, it's a touching, moving story of friendship and loyalty, and the personal cost that sustaining both / either can bring into a person's life. Second, the characters are vividly and memorably portrayed, flawed and multifaceted, recognizably human. Third, the narrative is, for the most part, beautifully written, with moments of subtle, graceful poetry juxtaposed with moments of stark violence and authentic sounding dialogue. Fourth, it is an exceptional example of literary craft, with metaphors and foreshadowing being effectively integrated into a story that, in hands less skilled than those of the author, might come dangerously close to being heavy handed and obvious but which, as written by renowned author John Steinbeck, is simply, powerfully tragic.

The area of literary craft, and of how it is brought to bear in terms of incorporating foreshadowing and metaphor into the story, is particularly noteworthy. There is the sense throughout the work that almost every situation or relationship, as well as many sections of dialogue, contain images and moments that foreshadow and / or symbolically evoke what is to follow. In this section alone, Lennie's affection towards soft, little living things foreshadows his attraction for the puppy he eventually adopts, while the death of the mouse foreshadows both the death of the puppy and the death of Curley's wife, both of which meet their ends as the result of Lennie not knowing, literally, the (physical) strength of his affection. George's telling of the story of their dream foreshadows his frequent retellings of that story to Lennie (including the moment at the novel's climax where he tells the story to lull Lennie into a sense of happiness and safety just before shooting him) and also to Candy (who buys into the dream and wants to come along). Then there are the intimations of Lennie's capacity for getting into trouble, which foreshadow George's explanation to Slim of what the most recent trouble was, and the trouble that Lennie gets them into as the result of his accidental killing of Curley's wife. Finally, George's telling Lennie to return to this same spot foreshadows the situation at the end of the narrative, in which Lennie does exactly that.

Meanwhile, this first part also introduces the novel's key themes. The (admittedly sometimes prickly) friendship between George and Lennie manifests and embodies the narrative's central thematic consideration, relating to the nature and value of loyalty and affection. The work's second, and related, theme of the nature and value of compassion also manifests here, in that George's feelings towards Lennie are clearly grounded in compassion and protectiveness. There is also the narrative's thematic contemplation of loneliness, manifest here for the first time in the opening lines of George's story of the farm. That same story also initiates the narrative's thematic interest in dreams and ambition with the first of many recountings of George and Lennie's dream of an independent farm, an example of the work's thematic contention that dreams can go a long way towards aiding survival in difficult situations.

Vocabulary

juncture, debris, sycamore, recumbent, skitter, horizontal, morose, despair, triumphant, periscope, bindle, lumber (v.), brusque, pantomime, contemplate, imperious, whimper, quiver, elaborate (adj.), mimic, anguish, cautious, sphere, glimmer

Pages 17 - 37

Summary

The next day, when Lennie and George arrive at the ranch, they are shown to the bunkhouse by elderly “swamper” Candy, who is missing one of his hands and is accompanied by his elderly dog. As they settle in, Candy tells them about some of the other men on the farm – in particular, the “nigger” stable hand Crooks, who is (Candy says) often bullied by the ranch hands, and the sometimes short-tempered boss. When the boss turns up to sign George and Lennie in, Candy goes out, leaving the boss to complain about their being late. As George explains how he and Lennie were misdirected, the boss notices that Lennie stays silent, and wonders whether George is trying to trick either him or Lennie. George tells him that Lennie is his cousin, that he was kicked in the head by a horse when he was little, and that George has taken on the family responsibility for taking care of him. After the boss goes, and as George deals out cards for the first of several hands of solitaire he plays throughout the novel, conversation between Lennie and George reveals that they’re not cousins at all, with George saying again life would be a lot easier if he wasn’t responsible for Lennie.

At that moment, George realizes that Candy and his dog are outside, and he angrily accuses Candy of listening to their conversation. As Candy is reassuring him, Curley comes in, looking for the boss. As Candy is saying the boss just left, narration describes how Curley seems to be readying himself for a fight with Lennie. Curley, meanwhile, demands that Lennie and George do as he tells them to do, and goes. When George comments on how much he already dislikes Curley and how he had better be careful around Lennie, Candy reveals that Curley is the boss’s son, and that he likes to pick fights. Candy also reveals that Curley is recently married, and that Candy thinks Curley’s wife is a “tart”. After Candy goes, George warns Lennie to be careful around Curley, makes Lennie promise to have nothing to do with him, and reminds him again of their agreement – if there’s trouble, to meet down by the river.

Curley’s wife then comes in, wearing a lot of makeup and showing off her legs. As George is telling her that Curley has just left, Slim passes, calls to her, and says Curley has just gone into the main house. After she goes, Lennie confesses that he found her “purty”, and George angrily tells him to stay away from her. Lennie cries out that he thinks the place is “mean”, but George tells him they have to stay and save their money. Slim then comes in and introduces himself. As he, Lennie and George are getting to know each other, another ranch hand, Carlson, comes in.

Conversation reveals that Slim’s dog has just had pups, that he’s already drowned the four smallest, and that Carlson thinks one of them should be given to Candy to replace his elderly dog. At that moment, the men are called to go for dinner. As Slim and Carlson go out, Lennie reacts with excitement. George, realizing what he’s excited about, agrees to ask if Lennie can have a pup to raise. Just as they’re leaving, Curley comes back in looking for his wife. When he finds she’s gone, he goes out, leaving

George to comment that he's worried that he is going to get so angry with him he might just get into a fight himself.

Analysis

As is the case throughout the story, the main points to note have to do with ways the narrative lays the groundwork (foreshadows) what is to come. In this chapter, important foreshadowings include Curley's attitude towards Lennie, Candy's story of how Curley likes to pick fights (which foreshadow Curley's doing exactly that in the following chapter) and a second reference to George and Lennie meeting down by the river if there's trouble. This, like the reference to this plan at the end of the previous chapter, foreshadows events in the final chapter, when George and Lennie are forced to do exactly as they've planned. Other foreshadowing includes the appearance of Curley's wife (whose flirtatiousness foreshadows her flirtatiousness in Part 5, which indirectly leads to her death) and the references to Slim's dog's pups (which foreshadow Lennie's adoption of one pup and the death of Candy's aged dog).

Other important elements in this section include the fact that neither the boss nor Curley's wife are ever given a name and the first appearance of George's habit of playing solitaire (a one person game of cards).

The narrative as a whole is written in such a way to suggest that of all the events it incorporates, there is very little that does not have multiple, symbolic and/or metaphoric layers of meaning. In the case of George's solitaire habit, these layers might include a sense that on some level, unconscious or subconscious, George knows he is ultimately alone in the world – in his responsibility for Lennie, and in his responsibility for/to himself. Solitaire is, after all, a game of cards played alone. Another possibility is that the habit is a foreshadowing of the novel's conclusion, Lennie's death leaving George as alone as he is when he plays cards. A related possibility is the idea that the habit is, in some way, an explanation of why he stays with Lennie. As troublesome as Lennie is, he is company for George, who fears being as alone as he feels. The solitaire habit can be seen as an externalized manifestation of that sense of aloneness. Finally, the solitaire habit is the first of several other manifestations of loneliness in the narrative – Candy's loneliness without his dog, and the mutual loneliness that leads to the tragic events of chapter six (the death of Curley's wife).

All that said, the idea that the solitaire habit is somehow an evocation and/or reflection of George's inner state is supported by the fact that George says nothing anywhere in the narrative about having any family or any connections. "I have no people" he says to Slim in the following section … no people, that is, but Lennie. This aspect of George's character is, perhaps, a key component of what makes the story and its ending so powerful, as George's compassion and affection for Lennie combine with his overwhelming sorrow to overcome his (George's) fear and loneliness and lead him to what Slim and the narrative suggest is the only thing a caring friend could, or should, do.

This section also continues the work's explorations of its other three main themes, friendship and loyalty (again primarily manifest in the relationship between George and Lennie), compassion (emerging here in the general compassion for Curley and his dog, Carlson's dislike of the dog excepted), and the power of dreams (again manifest in George's story of the longed-for farm).

Finally, a word about the use of the word "nigger". When the novel was first published in 1937, and in spite of the freedom of American slaves brought about by the Civil War, the term was still in common usage, particularly by under-educated individuals such as those portrayed in the novel. It is included in this analysis first in reference to its use in the novel, and second as an evocation of / reference to the attitudes of the time in which the book was written and is set. In particular, the term evokes and defines the attitudes of the white characters towards Crooks, the black stable hand. It's also an evocation of the negative attitudes that disadvantaged white characters like George and, in particular, Lennie also experienced. This latter point is not made to suggest that George and Lennie were on the same social pecking order as the term "nigger" evokes – on the contrary, by simply being white they had more status than Crooks. There are, however, resonances with the prejudices faced by all three, particularly Lennie and Crooks, simply because they're different.

Vocabulary

whitewash, burlap, talcum, scoff, vial, cast iron, laden, skeptical, liniment, cesspool, mollify, pugnacious, gingerly, derogatory, solitaire, plaintive, contort, nasal, apprehensive, disengage, overtone, delicate, complacent, compliment, dignity, precede

Pages 38 – 53

Summary

Later that night, George and Slim are alone in the bunkhouse. Slim muses on how unusual it is for two men to be traveling together the way George and Lennie do. George speaks of how he knew Lennie's Aunt Clara, and how when she died, Lennie just started tagging along with him. He tells Slim of how he (George) used to tease and manipulate Lennie, but how eventually got tired of it when he saw how vulnerable Lennie could be. He also reveals what drove him and Lennie away from the job they just left – the girl whose dress Lennie touched screamed that she was being raped, making him too scared to let go. This made her even more scared, which made the men of the town even more anxious to imprison Lennie, which made it even more important for him and George to get away. Just as Slim is commenting that he can tell Lennie isn't really mean, Lennie comes into the bunkhouse, bringing with him one of the newborn pups. George angrily tells him to take the pup back to its mother and Lennie does, leaving Slim to comment that he's just like a child.

Candy and his dog come in, followed shortly by Carlson, who suggests that because the elderly dog is suffering so much, it'd be best to put him out of his misery. Candy is reluctant, but Slim offers him one of the new puppies, and comments that it's time for the dog's life to end. As another worker, Whit, comes in, Candy agrees. Carlson takes out his gun and leads Candy's dog into the night. Candy, meanwhile, just lies on his bed and stares into space. As silence fills the bunkhouse, the men wait to hear the inevitable shot, at one point becoming so wound up that Whit suggests they start playing cards. After a while, the shot is heard, and Candy turns his face to the bunkhouse wall. Meanwhile Crooks, the "nigger" stable-hand, comes in and asks for Slim's help with one of the horses. As Slim gets up to go, Crooks also tells him that Lennie is playing with the pups, but Slim says it's all right. After Slim goes out, Whit and George continue to play cards, their conversation revolving around Curley's wife and how dangerous a woman she is.

Analysis

Here again, the most important element to note is the narrative's foreshadowing of future events. In this section, there are two extremely significant foreshadowings. The first is in George's narrative of Lennie's encounter with the girl, which foreshadows events in chapter five when Curley's wife reacts to Lennie's increasing attentions with the same sort of fear that, in turn, triggers accidentally murderous fear in Lennie. The second foreshadowing in this section is the shooting of Candy's dog, a foreshadowing of events in the final chapter when George shoots Lennie right down to a couple of key details, including the weapon used in both shootings (Carlson's gun) and the method of shooting (in the back of the head). That said, while the foreshadowing is clear and while the narrative has the equally clear intention to parallel the two shootings, there is some

question as to how similar the circumstances actually are. Candy's dog is clearly unhappy and suffering and, as is generally hoped to be the case when animals are euthanized, is being put out of his misery. Lennie is in many ways suffering and unhappy, but arguably not to the point where his death is a mercy – at least, not so much for himself as it is for others whom he might potentially kill.

Meanwhile, the death of Candy's dog triggers a restatement of the narrative's thematic emphasis on loneliness, with the narrative of the incident creating the very strong sense that for Candy, he is now utterly alone in the world, and that the dog was the last thing that kept him from that loneliness. The narrative's thematic exploration of the nature and value of friendship and loyalty also takes an interesting turn in this section, with George's explanation of just where his loyalty to Lennie came from – specifically, his growing awareness of Lennie's profound vulnerability (echoed, perhaps, in the similarly marked vulnerability of the pups). In other words, he became the friend he is out of compassion, which also manifests in the consideration of the ranch hands to Candy and his dog. Finally, the narrative's last main theme, its contemplation of the power of dreams and ambition, surfaces in the following section, which is a continuation of this same chapter.

Vocabulary

derision, receptive, nuisance, rheumatism

Pages 53 – 65

Summary

Carlson and Lennie come into the bunkhouse, and Carlson settles down to clean his gun, commenting that Curley is out looking for Slim, who he thinks is with his wife. At that moment Curley rushes in, and George tells him Slim is out in the barn with the horses. After Curley rushes out, Whit and Carlson soon follow, in the hopes of seeing a fight between Curley and Slim. Meanwhile, Lennie tells George how gentle he's been with the pups, and George reminds him again that if there's any fighting, he (Lennie) is to stay clear. Lennie then asks George when they might be ready to buy the ranch with the rabbits. George says it'll take a while and starts talking about the place he has in mind. As George tells the story, Candy turns around and starts listening, confessing that he has some money saved and asking whether it might be possible for him to live on the farm as well. George does some calculations and realizes that with his upcoming pay, he and Lennie and Candy might just be able to make it work. Candy comments that he doesn't want what happened to his dog to happen to him, and George finally agrees. As he hears the other men returning, George tells Lennie to promise to not tell anyone about their plan, and George promises. As the other men come in, Candy sadly tells George that he should have killed his dog himself.

Slim, Whit, Carlson and Curley come in, with Slim and Carlson taunting Curley about how foolish he's being about his wife. When Curley sees that Lennie, still thinking about the farm and the rabbits and the puppy, is smiling, he loses his temper. Thinking Lennie is laughing at him, Curley attacks him, punching him in the head and face. Lennie refuses to fight back, but George tells him to go ahead. Finally, Lennie grabs hold of one of Curley's fists and gradually crushes all the bones in it. George and Slim eventually make him let go, and as Carlson goes to fetch a wagon to take him to the doctor, George worries that he and Lennie are going to get fired. Slim then tells Curley that they will all keep quiet about what happened (i.e., that he attacked Lennie) if he agrees to do the same and say he got his hand caught in a machine. Curley agrees and is taken out. Lennie worries that now George won't let him tend the rabbits, and George tells him everything's all right.

Analysis

The only circumstance in this section that might be said to be foreshadowing is how Lennie crushes Curley's hand – specifically, his grabbing and holding on out of fear, in the same way as he grabbed the girl's skirt and the way in which he grabs Curley's wife's hair in chapter five. That's not to say, however, that there are not other important elements to this section. Candy's being drawn in to George's dream of the future, for example, is a manifestation of one of the narrative's central thematic considerations – the power and attraction of dreams and ambition. Then there is the question of what motivates George's behavior – specifically, his calling out to Lennie to fight Curley back.

On first glance, it isn't entirely clear why he does so, given that he's so insistent elsewhere in the narrative that Lennie behave himself so that their chance to earn enough money to buy their farm aren't put at risk. Granted, the narrative has indicated several times that George really dislikes Curley, but his actions here suggest that that dislike is, in effect, more powerful than his dreams of the future. Another possibility is that when push comes to shove (literally), George cares enough for Lennie that seeing him actually attacked triggers such intense feelings of protectiveness that any other consideration goes by the wayside. If this is, in fact, the case, then there might be further explanation here of George's actions at the conclusion of the narrative – specifically, his shooting of Lennie before anyone else can. George's sense of protectiveness, at that point, might be so strong that he will put himself through the suffering of both ending Lennie's life and spending the rest of his own life without the only companion he has ever really had, if only so he can protect Lennie from what he no doubt believes will be a cruel, painful end to his life.

Vocabulary

hoosegow, alfalfa, rapt, entrance, reverent, bemused, carnival, cower

Pages 66 – 83

Summary

Alone in his room, Crooks (the “nigger” stable hand) massages his misshapen back with liniment. Lennie comes in, and at first Crooks, wanting to preserve his privacy, angrily demands that he leave. Conversation reveals, however, that George and the other men have gone into town, and that Lennie saw the light in Crooks’ room and wanted to sit for a while in order to be less lonely. Crooks eventually allows him to stay and then starts to tease him about what would happen to him of George didn’t return from town. Lennie says that George would never do that. Crooks continues to taunt him, but stops when he sees Lennie beginning to get angry, and explains that he sometimes starts acting strangely because he’s alone so much.

Candy comes looking for Lennie but is reluctant to come into Crooks’ room. Crooks grudgingly lets him in, and Candy starts talking about the plans he, George and Lennie have for the farm. When Crooks pointedly suggests that he’s seen men like them before, all with dreams of land that come to nothing, Candy tells him the money is in the bank right at that moment. Crooks suddenly asks whether he could join them, but before anyone can answer, Curley’s wife comes to the door, looking for Curley but eventually saying she knows where he and the others went, commenting that they left the “weak ones” behind. She then asks what happened to Lennie’s hand, and although Candy tries to cover for the suddenly frightened Lennie, Curley’s wife indicates she doesn’t believe the story about Curley getting his hand caught in a machine. Candy loses his temper with her, threatening to tell Curley what she’s doing. Ignoring him, she asks how Lennie got the bruises on his face. Candy again tells her to leave and Crooks backs him up, but Curley’s wife then mocks them both, Crooks because he’s black and Candy because she believes that no one would ever believe anything he said about her. She goes anyway, saying as she leaves that she’s glad Lennie beat up Curley.

Crooks then tells Candy and Lennie to leave, saying he’d like some privacy. At that point, George returns and fetches Lennie, reacting with disapproval when Candy tells him that he’s been talking about the farm and the rabbits. As George, Lennie and Candy are leaving, Crooks tells Candy to forget what he said about wanting to come along. After the others go, Crooks resumes rubbing his back with liniment.

Analysis

At first glance, this short section seems somewhat out of place, in that it begins and ends with narrative focus on a character who, for the most part, has had very little to do with the action. On further consideration, however, the value of this section can be seen in, ironically enough, the comments of Curley’s wife and her admittedly vicious, but interestingly accurate, comment about “the weak ones”. The comment is interesting because on one level, she’s absolutely right – Crooks is weak because of his race,

Candy is weak because of his age and his missing hand, and Lennie is weak because of his diminished mental capacity. On another level, however, she is absolutely wrong – not about Candy or about Crooks, because they are also emotionally weak, but about Lennie, who is physically far stronger than she or anyone else knows. She has misjudged him in the same way as everyone else, perhaps even George, who fears for him and on some level is afraid of him, but who has no real idea about just what he's capable of.

Other interesting elements to this section include Crooks' comment on being alone, which can be seen as an echo/parallel to the narrative's apparent emphasis on George's aloneness. Crooks' aloneness is more literal, with George's aloneness implied metaphorically through his playing of solitaire, but there is the clear sense here that ultimately, the two men have more in common than they, and perhaps the reader, at first realize. Meanwhile, there is a reiteration of the narrative's thematic emphasis on the power and attraction of dreams as Crooks, in spite of his cynical warnings that it will never work, attempts to make his way into the plan to purchase an independent farm. What's interesting about this particular manifestation of that theme is that Crooks abandons the dream almost as soon as he realizes he wants to be part of it. His capacity to dream as powerfully as George, Lennie and Candy has clearly been bullied out of him by Curley's wife and others, perhaps a foreshadowing of how George has his own ability to hold onto the dream beaten out of him by circumstances – specifically, by Lennie's mental disability and his resultant lack of control / tendency towards violence. Or, perhaps most specifically, George's dreams are brought to an end by Lennie's killing of Curley's wife.

Vocabulary

riveter, accumulate, possession, maul (v.), aloof, intensity, adjust, disarming, persuasive, apprehension, brutal, overwhelmed, sullen, contemptuous, indignation, dignity, floozy, averted, crestfallen

Pages 84 – 98

Summary

On a quiet summer Sunday afternoon, as the other men are outside in the yard playing horseshoes, Lennie sits in the barn with the body of his pup, which he has just accidentally killed. Worried that George will find out and that he will stop him (Lennie) playing with the rabbits when they get their farm, Lennie first tries to bury the pup beneath some hay, but then thinks that because it was an accident, and George might forgive him. As he's trying to figure out what to do, Curley's wife appears, looking for someone to talk to. He tells her about the pup and she tries to comfort him by saying he can always get another one, but he says that George probably won't let him, adding that George also said he wasn't supposed to talk to her. This causes Curley's wife to lose her temper and talk at angry length about she's always ignored – by her mother, by the men who promised to put her into the movies, and by Curley.

Lennie starts talking about the pup, wondering if he explained to George what happened, George would let him keep the rabbits. When Curley's wife asks why he likes rabbits so much, Lennie says he likes petting them because they're soft. This leads Curley's wife to let him touch her hair, which she says is just as soft. When she sharply warns him to not mess it up, Lennie becomes frightened and holds her hair tighter. She becomes upset, crying out and trying to get away. As he's trying to keep her quiet, Lennie accidentally breaks her neck, and she dies. Lennie tries to cover up with hay in the same way he did the pup … realizes he's done another bad thing … and remembers how George told him to go hide by the lake if anything ever went wrong. He goes, taking the body of the pup with him.

The body of Curley's wife lies alone for a while, but then Candy comes in, looking for Lennie to talk more about their farm. He discovers the body, realizes what happened, and fetches George, who realizes not only what has happened, but what will happen and what needs to happen. The other men need to be gathered, Curley will want to track down Lennie and shoot him … and that all the dreams of the farm are dead. George then makes a plan to go back out of the barn and come in as if he hadn't been in at all, in order to avoid suspicion of being involved. Candy agrees to support his lie, and George runs out. After speaking angrily to the body of Curley's wife, Candy goes out to get the other men, who rush in and see the body.

Events unfold just as George said they would – everyone assumes Lennie was involved, and Curley sets off to hunt him down. Carlson runs to fetch his gun just as George comes in, wearing a coat and hat. Curley runs out to fetch his shotgun, and shortly Carlson comes back, saying his gun has been stolen. Curley sends Whit to get the deputy sheriff, and then tells George to come with them while they hunt Lennie. George tries to convince Curley not to hurt Lennie because of Lennie's mental condition, but Curley isn't buying it, saying he's going to shoot Lennie himself. After the other men go, Candy remains, lying down in the hay.

Analysis

It likely won't come as a surprise to the reader that Lennie causes the deaths of both his pup and Curley's wife, both events having been foreshadowed so thoroughly in the earlier parts of the narrative. It may come as a surprise, however, that the confrontation between Lenny and Curley's wife is triggered not by the latter's sexual promiscuity, but by what seems to be loneliness on the part of them both – Lennie's loneliness for comfort, the wife's loneliness for someone to listen to her. In short, with what happens to these two characters, the narrative seems to be building on thematically relevant statements it has made in relation to the characters of George and Candy – that loneliness is a soul-destroying, and life-destroying, state of being.

It also likely won't come as a surprise that Curley's wife dies in the way she does, with its clear, probably deliberate echoes of the incident between Lennie and the girl in the pretty dress that drove him and George from their previous job. Neither will it come as a surprise that both George and Candy reach the immediate conclusions that they do, nor that Curley reacts violently. It may come as a surprise that Lennie actually remembers George's instructions and heads off for their prearranged meeting at the lake. Finally, it probably won't come as a surprise that Carlson's gun has gone missing, not when the reader takes note of the carefully pointed out change in George's appearance, the implication of which is that he has stolen the gun and is, if he can, going to shoot Lennie before anyone else can.

Finally, it's important to note the writing in this section, particularly in the paragraphs following the death of Curley's wife. One of the most gently poetic sections in the narrative, the graceful understatements of beauty, and of the life of the barn going on in spite of the presence of the dead body, are simultaneously somewhat jarring and ultimately true to life. For it is a truism that even in the aftermath of the most violent deaths, accidental like that of Curley's wife or deliberate like Lennie's, life in the rest of the world does go on. These few paragraphs delicately, but quite clearly, reiterate that point.

Vocabulary

talon, halter, console, soothe, confide, conscious, disapproving, snivel

Pages 99 – 107

Summary

In poetic prose that echoes that of the first chapter, narration describes the pond to which George told Lennie to return, paying particular attention to a heron making a meal out of a water snake. As Lennie arrives, the heron takes off … and a second snake retreats into the reeds at the side of the pond.

As Lennie sits and looks into the pond, he imagines being visited by his Aunt Clara who, speaking in Lennie's own voice, tells him angrily how good George has been to him. Lennie protests that he tried to do as George wanted him to and promises to go live in the hills where he'll be no trouble. Aunt Clara tells him he always says that, and Lennie says he knows George will never let him tend the rabbits now. Aunt Clara disappears, and Lennie imagines being visited by a giant rabbit, who also talks in Lennie's own voice and says angrily that he would never remember to take care of the rabbits anyway. When Lennie protests that he would, the rabbit tells him George is going to leave him.

As Lennie cries out for George, George himself appears, sitting beside him and assuring him that having done another bad thing doesn't matter. Lennie asks George to "give him hell" the way he usually does, and George starts talking about how life would be easier if Lennie weren't around, but then stops himself. Lennie then promises to go away into the hills, but George says he wants Lennie to stay. Lennie excitedly asks George to tell him the story of what they'll do when they get enough money to buy their farm, adding that they're not going to end up like the other lonely ranch hands because they've got each other.

As he begins the story, George becomes aware that the voices of shouting men are coming closer. He tells Lennie to take off his hat and to look out across the lake, as though he can see what George is describing. As George begins the story (the same story as he told before), he takes out Carlson's gun, and after some hesitations, shoots Lennie in the back of the head. After throwing the gun to the ground, George is staring at his hand as the shouting men hurry up. Slim sits beside George and says, "A guy got to sometimes" even as Curley is marveling at the deed having been done and Carlson is wondering exactly how. As George says that Lennie had the gun and that he (George) was only able to gain control of it after a struggle, Slim helps him to his feet, saying the two of them will go and have a drink.

As the two men leave, Carlson wonders aloud "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?"

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the deliberate echo of the first chapter that opens this final one, while the second point to note is the image of death (the heron eating the innocent snake) juxtaposed with the image of survival (the second snake safely swimming away after the heron departs). Given the work's apparent, and previously discussed, tendency to reinforce its central thematic contentions and narrative events with imagery and other elements of literary craft, it might not be going too far to suggest that the two snakes represent Lennie and George. Lennie is the first snake, being "eaten" (i.e., destroyed) by the random chance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (i.e., with Curley's wife in the barn). George is the second snake, surviving as the result of potential danger (i.e., Lennie) no longer being a source of worry.

The second point to note is Lennie's hallucinations, an unexpected (but not jarringly unlikely) turn of narrative event. While this is the first time in the work that Lennie's imagination takes this particular turn, it seems fitting, somehow, that his mind would work in this particular way. It's interesting to note, meanwhile, that while the images are of things that Lennie loves (i.e., his Aunt Clara, rabbits), they speak to him disparagingly. Whereas previously he was perhaps fearful of himself, there is the sense now that while he may not hate himself, he has a powerful intuition of just how responsible he is for the failing of his and George's dreams.

The third point to note about this chapter, which contains the work's narrative and thematic climax (as opposed to the death of Curley's wife, which was the event that triggered the climax), is the way it subtly but clearly builds a sense of suspense about what George is going to do. It could be argued that it would be the very rare reader who doesn't have at least an inkling of what's coming as soon as George appears at the pond – the question, for those who have tuned in, is more likely to be one of how he's going to do it rather than what he's going to do.

Here, though, is where the work's previously discussed sense of literary craft comes into play, drawing the reader into a sense of suspense about George while simultaneously drawing him/her into a sense of empathy and compassion for Lennie. George, compassionate man that he is beneath his sharp tongue and anger, ensures that Lennie dies happy, excited and imagining life with his beloved rabbits. It is this choice of George's that, perhaps more than anything else, shapes and defines the narrative's capacity to be profoundly moving, as well as embodying its central thematic concern relating to the power of friendship, loyalty and affection. In other words, what George does is an act of loyalty and love, in the same way as the wise but mysterious Slim acts out of loyalty and, if not love, at least respect for the difficult choice George has just made, and the even more difficult action he has just taken.

There are three final points to note about this section. First is the reiterated reference, at the beginning of George's story, to the loneliness of ranch hands, a loneliness that, as previously discussed, George seems to have desperately tried to keep at bay and which

he now inevitably, sadly, faces. Second is where the gun ends up when George throws it aside. Finally, there is the actual shooting itself, which the narration is careful to describe as being in the back of Lennie's head, exactly the same place as Carlson promised to shoot Candy's dog. Here again, it seems clear that the author's intent is to draw a clear, distinct parallel between the death of the nameless dog and the death of the hapless Lennie … but again, and also as previously discussed, there is the sense that the parallels aren't quite as complete as the author seems to think they are.

Vocabulary

heron, lance (v.), gingham, haunches, belligerent, frantic, topmost, monotonous, emphasis, dutiful

Characters

George

George is the narrative's central character, its protagonist. Initially portrayed as sharp-tongued, violent of temper, and grudgingly compassionate, events of the narrative gradually peel away layers of personality to reveal a profound sense of loneliness and a deep sense of affection, perhaps even love, for Lennie. George is, it seems, a good man but a markedly wounded one, desperate for something, anything that will bring what he believes to be an empty existence some meaning.

For most of George's adult life, it seems, he has been able to fill that emptiness with two things – dreams of an independently owned and run farm, and his friendship with Lennie, whom he often seems to berate but who, in turn, needs and respects and values him. The tragedy of the narrative is that, by its conclusion, George ends up with neither of those things. It might not be going too far, in fact, to suggest that George is actually a hero in the classic sense – that is, a generally noble human being brought to destruction (physical and/or emotional and/or spiritual) as the result of being unable to control, and/or compensate for, a personal flaw. George, in spite of his surface resentments and bitterness, is on some level a noble, admirable man, sacrificing a substantial amount of personal comfort and safety in order to take care of the less able Lennie. His flaw? Too much compassion, too much trust. He believes that Lennie, a good but profoundly flawed human being, can ultimately be trusted to behave with an awareness of both his strengths and his flaws. When Lennie proves unworthy of that trust, George decides that for Lennie's own good, and the good of others, Lennie's life must end. With a single gunshot, George brings to an end the source of meaning in his life, tragedy and suffering enveloping the remainder of his days as the result of his flawed, over-generous capacity to trust.

Lennie

Lennie is George's traveling companion and best friend, a hulking, slow-witted strong man with a degree of sensitivity to others but not enough intelligence, self-awareness, or self-control to be able to effectively act with sensitivity rather than in response to pure impulse. Lennie is vulnerable and gentle, violent only reluctantly and only when frightened or by accident. He is a figure of pathos, lonely and scared in a world that doesn't understand him, doesn't want to understand him, and doesn't seem interested in giving him a chance to be understood. George is a buffer between Lennie and the world wherever and whenever possible, but there are unfortunately times and places where George is unable to protect Lennie from himself, or those whom Lennie hurts from his unwitting power. Lennie is a simple man with simple, sensitive dreams and needs, and while his death is both pathetic and seemingly unavoidable, the reader (and George) can take at least some comfort in the fact that he died happy, mentally living his dream of a happy life taking care of rabbits.

Candy

Elderly ranch hand Candy, referred to in the narrative as a “swamper”, is the first person George and Lennie meet at their new job. Candy, who has only one hand (the other one having been lost in a way the narrative never specifies) is nearing the end of his life and his usefulness, and fears being discarded like a useless animal. His fears are eased somewhat when he finds himself absorbed into George’s dream of an independent farm, and is crushed when, as the result of Lennie’s killing Curley’s wife, those dreams are rendered empty and useless.

The Boss

The unnamed boss, or ranch owner, appears only briefly, in Part 2. Sharp tongued and sharp eyed, no-nonsense and inquisitive, he interrogates George intently about his background and intentions, accepting his lies as truth once George convinces him that Lennie is too good a worker to let go.

Curley

Curley is the boss’s arrogant son. As described by Candy, Curley is a small man with a big grudge and a big chip on his shoulder, eager or perhaps desperate to prove his worth by continually picking fights with men both bigger and smaller and thinking this makes him more impressive when, in fact, it makes him look like a fool. He loses large amounts of status and prestige, not to mention the use of a crushed hand, when he provokes a fight with Lennie in front of witnesses. Curley is, in short, a bully who gets what many would call a taste of what he deserves.

Curley’s Wife

Curley’s unnamed wife is a hard-edged, sexy young woman, her manipulative nature, flirtatiousness, and sharp temper masking deep wounds and vulnerability … or so she would have Lennie believe. Her clearly evident capacity for and tendency toward manipulating others would, in all likelihood, make the reader question whether her stories of being badly used by her mother and by men are in fact true, or whether they’re just an effort to get Lennie (and, by extension, the other people she probably tells) to feel sorry for her. Her life comes to an end when her attempts to connect with Lennie, made for whatever reason (desire for sex? loneliness? desire to gain control?) result in Lennie’s accidentally breaking her neck.

Slim

Slim is the ranch’s lead hand, portrayed in the narrative as wise, compassionate, and sensitive. A good listener, his presence enables George to feel comfortable telling him

the truth of Lennie's past, enables Candy to finally let go of his aged, beloved dog and, at the novel's conclusion following Lennie's death, enables George to at least begin to see the rightness of what he (George) did in ending Lennie's life.

Carlson, Whit

Carlson and Whit are two other ranch hands. Carlson is the more outspoken of the two, his intensifying dislike of Candy's aging, smelly dog leading to its being euthanized by gunshot. Whit is somewhat quieter but, at the same time, seems to be a bit wilder, in that he's the one who tries to encourage the unwilling George to spend at least some of his hard-earned, hard-saved money in a brothel (whorehouse).

Crooks

Crooks is the black stable hand, reviled and abused by almost everyone on the ranch except Lennie and, to a certain degree, Candy. Bitter and isolated, physically and emotionally misshapen he, Lennie and Candy share a few moments of feeling and being outsiders together, the temporary happiness of those moments leading Crooks to want to be part of George's dream of an independent farm. His long-standing bitterness, however, defined by how he and perhaps his race are viewed and treated, leads him to a quick, almost immediate, abandonment of that dream, an action that foreshadows its eventual disappearance from the lives of George and Candy.

Aunt Clara

Early in the narrative, Lennie is referred to as being raised by his Aunt Clara. Later, George reveals that Aunt Clara died when Lennie was very young, leaving him completely alone in the world except for George. At the end of the narrative, Aunt Clara appears in Lennie's imagination, speaking sharply to him about how badly he's treated George. In this, she might be seen as a manifestation and/or externalization of Lennie's conscience.

Objects/Places

Southern California

The novel, like many of the works of author John Steinbeck, is set in the agriculturally oriented valleys and plains of Southern California, a traditionally fertile area hit hard by the dry, hot conditions of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

The Salinas River

The Salinas River, in Southern California, is another oft-recurring element of setting in the work of this author. The first and final chapters of Of Mice and Men take place by a small pond on the banks of the river.

The Clearing by the Pond

This is where the first and last scenes of the novel are set, where Lennie and George mark the beginning of a new phase in their lives and, at the end of the novel, where they mark the ending of Lennie's life and of George's dreams.

The Pile of Ashes

In the clearing by the pond, there is a pile of ashes left behind by, as the narrative points out, the fires of an unknown number of hardscrabble travelers on similar journeys to that of George and Lennie – in search of income, and/or of fulfillment of their dreams.

Mice

Big, soft-hearted Lennie is fascinated by the feel of small, soft things, about the only thing in his life that awakens his capacity for gentleness (as opposed to most of the other circumstances in his life, which tend to trigger his capacity for strength and/or for violence). In the first chapter of the work, Lennie has the body of a dead mouse in his pocket, killed by him when it nipped his finger and he tapped it a little too hard as discipline. Narration eventually reveals that not only did he have a succession of mice as pets when he was little, but that he also killed almost all of them in exactly the same way.

Rabbits

George's dream of establishing and living on an independently owned and run farm includes something for Lennie – a place where he can breed and take care of rabbits,

for which he feels as blindly affectionate as he does mice. For Lennie, rabbits are a manifestation of what dreams and ambitions he is able to form, and the leverage by which George attempts to control him – if Lennie doesn't behave, George says, he won't be allowed to have any rabbits.

The Ranch

George and Lennie take jobs at a local ranch/farm, where they are put to work harvesting grain. The action of the main part of the narrative takes place here.

The Bunkhouse

This is the building where Lennie, George and the other ranch hands sleep and relax. Each hand has a bed and a small set of shelves where he is able to keep a few personal possessions. It is an anonymous place, evocative of the kind of life men like Lennie and George are forced to live – impermanent, un-individualized, and ultimately insecure.

Carlson's Gun

One of the ranch hands, Carlson, has a gun which he uses to kill the aged dog of another of the hands, and which George uses, in the work's final chapter, to kill Lennie. The gun is a metaphoric link between the two killings, a key element in the narrative's apparent contention that the two killings are similar in intent and result.

Solitaire

George has a habit of playing solitaire (i.e., a one person card game). As previously discussed, this habit is evocative of the work's thematic consideration of loneliness, and a specific manifestation of the personal loneliness George feels and tries to keep at bay by sustaining his relationship with Lennie.

George's Dream Ranch

Several times throughout the work, George refers to his dream of saving up a "stake", or investment, so he can purchase and run a farm he can run by himself, without having to work with anyone else. As part of that dream, he promises Lennie that he can have a hutch of rabbits to rear and have as pets. Later in the narrative, Candy and Crooks ask to be included in the dream, such is the power and attraction of the independence and freedom it represents. After Lennie kills Curley's wife, however, that freedom is no longer a possibility, and everyone who shared in the dream is forced to abandon it.

The Barn

The barn on the ranch where George and Lennie find work is the setting for the incident that triggers the novel's climax – Lennie's accidental killing of Curley's wife. Ironically, it is also a place of new life – specifically, the puppies born to Slim's dog, one of which Lennie adopts for his own and accidentally kills.

Themes

Loyalty and Compassion

This is the work's primary thematic consideration, the events of its narrative defined by these entwined principles – loyalty increasing compassion, compassion awakening loyalty. For the most part, this theme is enacted by / manifested in the character of George who, in spite of his often very angry protestations of resentment and occasional bullying of Lennie, is in fact profoundly attached to him, for reasons outlined in "Loneliness" below. It is the combination of loyalty and compassion that defines and motivates virtually every one of George's actions – his almost bullying determination that Lennie behave appropriately and circumspectly, the way he presents himself and Lennie to the boss and the other employees on the ranch, and ultimately even his dreams of the future – they are as much for Lennie as they are for himself.

The narrative's final moments, in which George shoots Lennie in the back of the head, are arguably the most vivid and dramatic manifestation of this theme, portrayed as a similar act of compassion and mercy as the euthanizing of Candy's aged dog. There are several reasons why the act could, and in the author's apparent intent should, be viewed this way. First, George seems to desperately want to avoid Lennie suffering in any way (which he would undoubtedly do at the hands of the cruel and vindictive Curley) that he takes matters into his own hands and ends the potential for Lennie's suffering himself. Clearly, George at least considers himself to be compassionate. Second, he makes sure that in the moments before the killing takes place, Lennie is as happy as he could possibly be. This is clearly compassionate. The third point to consider here is the reaction of Slim, whom the author has, to this point, portrayed as significantly wise and compassionate, and whose support and apparent understanding of what George has done are further indications to the reader that s/he is intended to see George's actions in the same light.

Loneliness

Several aspects of the narrative suggest that the reason George is so loyal to Lennie, so determined to preserve their relationship in spite of its challenges, is that he is profoundly lonely, and that he knows, on some level, that Lennie is as well. These aspects include the reference to the lonely lives of itinerant, nomadic ranch hands like them (i.e., moving around from job to job with no sense of home or roots) that begins every retelling of George's dream of an independent ranch. If they have a ranch of their own, he seems to be saying, they will never be lonely again. Another aspect of the narrative supporting this contention can be found in George's conversation with Slim (Part 3, Section 1) in which George speaks of having "no people" and of Lennie's family (except for Aunt Clara) having died when he was young. Again, the sense here is that George and Lennie are both alone in the world. Finally, there is George's habit of playing solitaire, a card game played by an individual person alone which, on the

several occasions it occurs throughout the narrative, seems evocative of George's experience of feeling essentially alone.

There are other manifestations of loneliness in the narrative – specifically, in the characters of Curley's wife (who speaks of her loneliness to Lennie shortly before her death) and of Crooks (portrayed by both narration and his own dialogue as being isolated as the result of his race). There is the sense that the loneliness of both these characters is motivated and defined by other factors – in the case of the former, manipulative sexual desire, in the case of the latter racially defined bitterness and self-isolation. Ultimately, however, whatever the source and trigger, the loneliness of these two characters echoes that of both Lennie and George, making consideration of loneliness an important component of the work's overall thematic intentions.

Ambitions and Dreams

Both the positive and negative sides of having dreams and ambitions are explored throughout the work. In terms of the positive, the primary manifestation of this theme is in George's dreams of an independently owned and run ranch, a place where he and Lennie can make the kind of home they want for as long as they want. The power of this dream is so infectious that Lennie, Candy, and even the embittered Crooks find themselves drawn into it. On the darker side, there are the dreams of Curley and his wife, the former of being physically powerful and intimidating (manifested in his bullying attitudes and actions), the latter of being physically attractive, popular, and a movie star. Both are embittered by their lack of accomplishing their dreams, a circumstance that leads them to become even more manipulative and destructive.

The key point to note about all these dreams, and therefore about the portrayal of dreams in general in the work, is that they enable those who have them to survive the difficult, painful realities in which they find themselves. George and Lennie enable themselves to endure the wandering, unstable, hard-working lifestyle in which they find themselves through clinging to, and building on, their dreams of a better life. Candy attaches himself to that dream because he sees his life becoming more and more unbearable, particularly after the loss of his lifelong companion (i.e., his dog) and the impending loss of his job. The dream will, he seems to believe, help him avoid what he is coming to see as his inevitable end. For Crooks, the dream offers the possibility of escape from the tortured, racism-defined semi-existence in which he finds himself. For Curley and his wife, their dreams enable them to hope for their own escape from what they believe is the limited, limiting, deadening lives in which they find themselves.

In short, dreams and ambitions offer escape and hope, but for almost all the characters those dreams lead to destruction. The only possible exception is Lennie. There is the sense that, in portraying him as dying in the midst of his happiest dream, the narrative is suggesting that that dream is, perhaps paradoxically, alive for him forever. In other words, his dreams are the equivalent of heaven.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person, objective/omniscient point of view. The primary point of focus is that of George, with the narrative centering primarily on his perspectives, actions, and reactions. Throughout the work, however, there are frequent narrations and/or descriptions of setting, most notably in Parts 1 and 6 (where the focus is on the environment in and around the small pond where George and Lennie are introduced) and Part 5 (where the focus is on the environment and atmosphere in and around the barn). There are also narrative excursions into the mind and experience of other characters, most notably Crooks (chapter four) and Lennie (chapter six), where the writing focuses on their experiences and thoughts.

In terms of the work's thematic point of view, and as previously discussed, there is the clear sense that the author intends, to some degree and for whatever purpose, for the reader to interpret Lennie's death as being symbolically and/or metaphorically linked to that of Candy's aged, infirm dog – in other words, as a form of euthanasia. Carlson's shooting of the dog and George's shooting of Lennie are clearly echoes of one another, both in terms of details associated with the action (including the same weapon being used and the "victims" being shot in exactly the same place) and in terms of reasons for the action being taken – that is, reasons of compassion. It could be argued that the life of a human being is intrinsically worth more than that of an animal, no matter who much difficult that human being (i.e., Lennie) has with fitting in with human society in general. It could also be argued, however, that in his instincts and lack of insight or wisdom, Lennie is almost animalistic in terms of how he relates to the world. On this aspect of the work's point of view, the writer makes no clear or explicit statements, leaving the ultimate decision of the appropriateness of the parallel to the reader.

Setting

There are several important elements to consider when it comes to the work's setting. First, there is the aspect of time and place – Southern California in the mid 1930s, the time at which the work was written. At that particular time, that part of the world was, like most of the rest of the nation (and indeed the continent), suffering from the effects of extensive heat and drought. It was the so-called "Dirty Thirties". Land that was once rich in possibility became barren of hope and opportunity. The valley in which the work is set escaped the worst of the drought – witness the fact that there actually jobs to be had for George and Lennie. There was, however, still hardship both in the area and in the rest of the country, with the environmental and/or climatic circumstances of the physical environment echo the emotional circumstances in which Steinbeck's characters, here and elsewhere in his work, experience.

Another important aspect of the work's setting is its geographical placement – specifically, the fact that it is set on a ranch, a collection of buildings surrounded by expanses of land. There is an echo here of the experiences of George and, particularly, of Lennie – a collection (pair) of individuals surrounded by what George believes to be expanses of judgmental, potentially harmful people and attitudes.

Finally, there are the individual areas in which many of the work's particular scenes are set – the clearing by the pond (representative of the beauty, quiet, peace and freedom of the natural life to which George and Lennie seem to aspire) and the bunkhouse (in which human beings are accommodated in situations that leave them little better than animals) . The final notable area in which action takes place is the barn, which houses both new life (the puppies) and death (of both Curley's wife and the dreams of George, Lennie, and the others who have bought into those dreams).

Language and Meaning

Language is used in some very interesting ways in this work, with the juxtapositions of those ways providing powerful, sometimes effectively jarring support for the thematically relevant sense that human beings are, at least in the work's perspective, something apart from nature. Specifically, there are poetic descriptions of nature (most evident in the descriptions of the clearing by the pond in Parts 1 and 6) or of non-human existence (most evident in the descriptions/narratives of the barn in Part 5). There is a grace and beauty in these descriptive passages, a poetic warmth and capacity for quiet joy that, as mentioned, is a jarring but effective contrast to the coarseness of much of the dialogue (particularly between the ranch hands) and to the violence associated with many of the narrative's key events.

This last is true not only of the episodes of physical violence (the deaths of the animals, the death of Lennie, the fight between Lennie and Curley) but also the emotional violence. Examples of the latter include George's near-bullying of Lennie, Carson's clear bullying of Candy, the arrogance of Curley, and the aggressive sexuality of Curley's wife, almost violent in the way it makes its presence felt in the lives and perspectives of the men in the bunkhouse. In short, language is used to create a sense of isolation and separation, human beings from nature, the former in some sense embodying and/or manifesting death and destruction (no matter how compassionate or accidental the various incidents of violence are portrayed) within a context of the latter's living grace, effortless beauty, and inherent peace.

Structure

The work's structure is essentially linear, events and relationships moving in a straightforward fashion from A to B in a traditional cause and effect relationship. In other words, it follows conventional storytelling structure, moving from beginning (set up) through middle (complication) to end (resolution), taking the reader on a journey of hope and optimism similar to, and evocative of, the journey taken by central characters

George and Lennie. In short, the work's structural focus is essentially on those two characters, just as its thematic and emotional focus is.

There are, however, a couple of noteworthy exceptions, in which the story detours, for a moment, away from its protagonists and examines, for thematically relevant reasons, the lives and experiences of other characters – in particular, Crooks the stable hand, whose self-isolation and loneliness, at that particular point in the narrative, is a structural echo of the essential, thematically significant loneliness at the core of the experiences of both Lennie and George.

The other exceptions to the narrative's structural focus occur within the work's larger narrative framework – in other words, as the narrative moves forward in time, characters take a moment or two to move backwards in order to provide information necessary for understanding of, and insight into, that forward movement. These diversions, essentially flashbacks or exposition, occur in two main places – George's narrative of the past to Slim (Part 3) and the story of her past as told by Curley's wife to Lennie (Part 5). Again, it must be noted that these mini-narratives are not full diversions from the work's primary narrative line/structure, but are essentially pauses in its forward movement, necessary to add resonance, depth and information to the narrative in order to assist it reaching its full emotional potential.

Quotes

In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're pounding their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.

Never did seem right to me. S'pose Curley jumps a big guy an' licks him. Ever'body says what a game guy Curley is. And s'pose he does the same thing and gets licked. Then ever'body says the big guy ougtta pick somebody his own size, and maybe they gang up on the big guy … seems like Curley ain't given' nobody a chance.

[Slim] was capable of killing a fly on the wheeler's butt with a bull whip without touching the mule. There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love … his ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.

Carl's right, Candy, That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht sombody'd shoot me if I got old an' a cripple.

You give me a good whore house every time … a guy can go in an' get drunk and get ever'thing outa his system all at once, an' no messes. And he knows how much it's gonna set him back. These here jail baits is just set on the trigger of the hoosegow.

[I]t'd be our own, an' nobody could can us … we'd have a setter dog and a couple stripe cats, but you gotta watch out them cats don't get the little rabbits.

A guy sets alone out here at night, maybe reading books or thinkin' or stuff like that. Sometimes he gets thinkin' an' he got nothing to tell him what's so an' what ain't so. Maybe if he sees somethin', he don't know whether it's right or not … he can't tell. He got nothing to measure by.

And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young.

As happens sometimes, a moment settled and hovered and remained for much more than a moment. And sound stopped and movement stopped for much, much more than a moment. Then gradually time awakened again and moved sluggishly on.

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied.

He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering.

George shivered and looked at the gun, and then he threw it from him, back up on the bank, near the pile of old ashes.

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Obtain and view one of the many film and/or television adaptations of the novel. What elements were changed? What elements are different? Are the themes the same or different? How do the portrayals of George and Lennie agree and/or disagree with your imagination of them?

Topic 2

The narrative puts particular emphasis, at the beginning and the end, on a pile of ashes. Discuss the symbolic value of those ashes. What does their appearance on p. 2 foreshadow? What does their appearance on pp. 106 represent?

Topic 3

What do you think the author intended by not giving names to either the boss or Curley's wife?

Topic 4

Do you think George did the right thing in killing Lennie when and how he did? Why or why not?

Topic 5

Should Lennie have faced justice? Or should he have simply been kept away from other people to whom he could potentially cause harm?

Topic 6

Consider and discuss the parallels between the euthanasia of Candy's dog and George's shooting of Lennie. While the narrative clearly indicates that the two deaths are metaphorically linked, there is some question as to how far the parallels extend. Are the situations of Lennie and the dog comparable? Why or why not?

Topic 7

Have you ever had an experience of feeling as loyal and/or compassionate to a friend as George is to Lennie? Do you think you could ever make the kind of choice that

George makes in terms of doing something difficult, even painful, in order to help a friend?

Topic 8

Is there a particular dream, or goal, that you have that helps you through difficult times in the way George and Lennie's dream of the independent ranch helps them? What are you doing to help yourself achieve that goal?

Topic 9

Have you ever had an experience of isolation and loneliness of the sort experienced by Crooks and which the narrative suggests is experienced by George? How do you cope with that loneliness? What do you do to make it pass?