

Characterisation

- What is each character like?
- What does each character want?
- What are the relationships between characters?
- How does Steinbeck reveal the characters to us?
- What evidence can we find to help us assess each character?

Lennie Small

Lennie is, in a sense, the central character, although you could argue that it is his relationship with George that Steinbeck focuses on. The events of the novel revolve around Lennie and he is the main tragic figure, despite the fact that Curley's wife also dies, and at his hands. However, Lennie's lack of intelligence and initiative make him an unlikely tragic hero.

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Lennie Small is big and strong, but has well below average intelligence (1992 film adaptation)

Lennie's relationship with George

We learn that Lennie has attached himself to George after Lennie's Aunt Clara died. He is big and strong, but of well below average intelligence. He trusts George completely — a fact made painfully obvious to George

when, as he relates to Slim, he once told Lennie to jump into a river for a joke. Lennie nearly drowned.

Lennie is happy to follow George's lead in everything. We see this immediately by the way he still walks behind George, even in the open, almost knocking George over when he stops suddenly. Lennie is anxious to please George and trusts in his ability to do what is best for them both. He hates it when George is angry with him, as occurs in Section 1 when George bitterly complains about Lennie's behaviour getting them into trouble in Weed. Lennie does not need to say he is upset. George has only to look at Lennie's 'anguished face' to know. Lennie tries to appease George by creeping close to him and telling him that if they had any ketchup he would let George have it all. It is his way of trying to make a personal sacrifice for George's sake.

A 'nice fella'

Other characters in the novel comment on Lennie's good nature. Slim says of him: 'He's a nice fella. Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around' (A66, P44). Curley's wife, too, tells Lennie: 'You're nuts. But you're a kinda nice fella. Jus' like a big baby' (A126, P98). Even the cynical and isolated Crooks is won over by 'Lennie's disarming smile' (A101, P76). In fact, the only person on the ranch who dislikes Lennie is Curley, and that is because Curley resents 'big guys' because he is small and has an inferiority complex. Despite this, Lennie has no desire to hurt Curley when Curley attacks him in Section 3. He is frightened and pleads with George to make Curley stop. The only reason he grabs hold of Curley's hand and crushes it is because George tells him to 'get 'im'.

Cunning

Lennie, despite being trusting and unintelligent, can be surprisingly sneaky at times — though with little success because George knows him so well. The first time we see this is in Section 1, when Lennie retrieves the dead mouse that George has thrown away: 'What mouse, George? I ain't got no mouse' (A26, P9). Even when George threatens to 'sock' him, Lennie keeps up the pretence for a moment longer before pleading to be allowed to keep it.

Lennie behaves in a similar way when he tries to smuggle his puppy into the bunk house, and when he later tries to conceal the fact that he has killed the puppy.

Another aspect of Lennie's character that seems to contradict the image of him as the trusting fool is that he has an animal instinct for danger.

Pause for thought

For Lennie's death to be seen as tragic, we need to identify with him. Do you feel Steinbeck makes it possible for you to identify with Lennie — despite his lack of intelligence — and therefore to feel sympathy for him? If so, what factors help you to do this?



Key quotation

Slim (speaking of Lennie): 'He's a nice fella.' (A66, P44)

Curley's wife (to Lennie): 'You're nuts. But you're a kinda nice fella. Jus' like a big baby.' (A126, P98)



Grade **booster**

Note metaphors. Steinbeck often describes Lennie as an animal, especially a bear, which he resembles in size, strength and movements. He drags his feet like a bear. He is described as having 'paws' rather than hands. Even the way he drinks at the pool is like an animal that simply follows its nature.



Key quotation

George (to Lennie): 'When I think of the swell time I could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace.' (A30, P13)

As early as Section 2, he suddenly bursts out with 'I don' like this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outta here' (A55, P36).

The 'dream farm'

Lennie, more than anyone in the novel, believes in the dream of owning land and being self-sufficient. He is especially excited about being allowed to tend the rabbits and feed them alfalfa. It is a sad moment when, near the end of the novel, he has a hallucination in which a giant rabbit tells him he is not fit to tend rabbits. However, this moment gives way to his final vision of the dream farm, which allows him to die happy.

George Milton

Other characters are puzzled by George's travelling with Lennie, whose unintelligence makes him poor company and a dangerous liability. The boss suspiciously demands of George 'Say — what you sellin'? I said what stake you got in this guy? You takin' his pay away from him?' (A43, P24). Slim is more open-minded but still comments, 'Funny how you an' him string along together' (A65, P43). Even George seems puzzled at times about why he stays with Lennie.

George is intelligent

The fact that George stays with Lennie says a great deal about George's character. George is, after all, an intelligent man. He has enough vision to dream of an ideal future for himself and Lennie. He has practical foresight, telling Lennie to come and hide by the pool if he ever gets into trouble, and spotting immediately that Curley and his wife could cause trouble. He also shows quick-wittedness. For example, when he learns that Lennie has killed Curley's wife, he realises that people might think he had something to do with it. He therefore asks Candy to let him go to the bunk house while Candy breaks the news, so that the men will assume George was in the bunk house all the time. But this also gives him a chance to steal Carlson's gun. Even at such a difficult time he is already planning ahead to the moment when he will have to shoot Lennie.

George is modest

George is modest about himself. When Slim calls him 'a smart little guy', he replies that if he were clever he would not be doing a poorly paid manual job on a ranch: 'buckin barley for my fifty and found [fifty dollars a week, plus board and lodging]' (A65, P43). The real reasons for George doing this kind of work are more complicated. Although Steinbeck tells us nothing about George's background, there is nothing to make us think

that he has had the advantages of family, wealth or education. It would be difficult for George to pursue a career, or even hold down a job in one place for long, while he is committed to looking after Lennie.

George is careful and clean-living

It is part of George's character to be careful. This shows in a number of ways. In Section 1, he tries to prevent Lennie from drinking 'scummy' water that might be dirty and make Lennie ill (A20, P3). He is angry when he thinks that the previous occupant of his bunk may have had lice (A39, P20). He is cautious when it comes to telling others about the dream he shares with Lennie. When Candy overhears George and Lennie discussing it and asks if they know where to buy a farm, George is 'on guard immediately' and will not tell him where the farm is. He gradually opens up, but still watches Candy 'suspiciously' (A86, P64).

George is also careful with money. When Whit invites him to visit the brothel in Soledad, he responds cautiously: 'Might go in and look the joint over' (A79, P57). A little later, he explains that he and Lennie are 'rollin' up a stake' (saving money to buy their farm). He adds that he 'might go in an' set and have a shot [sit and drink a glass of whisky]' (A80, P58) but he will not pay two and a half dollars for a prostitute.

George's morality

Although the action of the novel is spread over only a few days, Steinbeck reveals that George has the capacity for moral growth. George confides in Slim that he used to enjoy feeling clever compared with Lennie, and he used to have fun at Lennie's expense until Lennie's near-drowning made him stop. This suggests that George has the humility to see when he has done wrong and is prepared to change. The compassion he has learned to feel for Lennie is part of why he stays with him.

Why George stays with Lennie

George complains that he could have an easy time without Lennie. However, you might ask yourself if he stays with Lennie purely out of a sense of moral duty. Although he says that Lennie is 'dumb as hell' (A65, P43), he is proud of Lennie's ability to work hard and take orders: 'Jus' tell Lennie what to do an' he'll do it if it don't take no figuring' (A64–65, P42–43). He also points out to people that Lennie is neither 'crazy' nor

Pause for thought



What do you think is George's attitude towards sex? When Candy tells him that Curley keeps his glove full of vaseline to keep his hand soft for fondling his wife, he seems quietly disgusted: 'That's a dirty thing to tell around' (A49, P30). He also has no time for Curley's wife herself, saying as little as possible to her. He has no interest in visiting prostitutes with the other men. On the other hand, he says that if he did not have to look after Lennie, he could 'maybe have a girl' (A24, P7). Is George morally upright or rather puritanical?

Grade booster

Note 'foreshadowing'. Steinbeck prepares us for George's mercy killing of Lennie by Candy's comment in Section 3: 'I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog' (A89, P67). George does not let a stranger shoot Lennie.





Pause for thought

Perhaps Lennie's dependency gives George's life a purpose. Do you think he would have found meaning in his life without Lennie? What do you imagine he will do after Lennie's death?



Key quotation

George, on his relationship with Lennie: 'We kinda look after each other.' (A57, P38)

'mean'. When George tells Lennie about their dream, an important part of it is that they are not like other migrant workers, because they have each other — they are not lonely.

George reveals most about his reasons for staying with Lennie in his conversation with Slim at the start of Section 3. George explains 'I ain't got no people' — he has no family (A67, P45). He says that men who travel alone 'don't have no fun' and eventually 'get mean'. Note how this contrasts with George's complaints to Lennie about what a 'swell time' he could have without Lennie. He tells Slim, 'you get used to goin' around with a guy an' you can't get rid of him' (A67, P45).

On the whole, it seems that, despite George's occasional complaints, his relationship with Lennie is mutually rewarding: they both benefit from it. It is enormously difficult for George when, at the end of the novel, he has to shoot Lennie rather than let him be caught and either lynched or put into an asylum. This is his ultimate act of taking responsibility for his friend.



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Candy

Candy is an elderly man who has a permanent job on the ranch as a swamper — keeping the bunkhouse clean. He is introduced as 'a tall, stoop-shouldered old man' (A38, P19). His stooping body language suggests hopelessness as well as age. He has lost his hand in an accident on the ranch, which is why his job is permanent. This, together with the fact that Candy received some compensation, shows that Steinbeck is being fair to ranch owners, not just portraying them as selfish exploiters. However, the fact that Candy lost his hand at all suggests that health and safety standards were poor.

Candy is, on the whole, good-natured. He speaks well of Crooks and of the boss, revealing that the boss treated his workers to a keg of whisky at Christmas. He calls Crooks a 'nice fella' (A41, P22) and the boss a 'pretty nice fella' (A41, P22). He shows some ability as a judge of character in his comments on Curley, observing that Curley picks fights with 'big guys' because he resents the fact that they're bigger than him (A48, P29). He also shows a sense of injustice when he says that when Curley beats a 'big guy', 'Ever'body says what a game guy Curley is' (A48, P29) and when he loses,

people say that the ‘big guy’ should pick on someone his own size.

Candy is also a gossip. For example, he tells George about Curley keeping one hand ‘soft for his wife’ (A49, P30).

One important detail to remember about Candy is that he has a smelly old dog. Candy proudly recalls what a good sheepdog he was. However, both Candy and the dog are now old and not much use to anyone. The insensitive Carlson badgers Candy to shoot the dog, and Candy eventually gives in and lets Carlson do it.

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Lennie, George and Candy

Despite his age and infirmity, Candy is still able to have hopes. When he overhears George and Lennie discussing their ‘dream farm’, Candy jumps on this idea as his salvation. When Curley’s wife dies, and he reluctantly accepts that this means the end of the dream, he is bitterly disappointed. She is the one character for whom he has shown dislike, calling her ‘a tart’ (A50, P31). When she is dead, he feels only anger towards her: ‘gradually his sorrow and his anger grew into words. “You God damn tramp,” he said viciously’ (A132, P104).

The boss

The boss is ‘a little stocky man’ who wears jeans like a working man but also ‘high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man’ (A41, P22). Steinbeck spends relatively little time on him, and never names him. Yet the boss is in one sense an important character, in that he owns and runs the ranch, hires and fires workers, and determines their pay and conditions. He also has importance in a dramatic sense in that he allows his son Curley to behave as he does, even though it interferes with the smooth running of the ranch.

Grade **booster**

Candy’s gossipy nature, though believable, is also a narrative device by which Steinbeck can quickly reveal information about the characters — especially important in a stage version of the novel. Thus Candy is like the ‘Chorus’ in ancient Greek plays, and in some Shakespeare plays, such as *Henry V*.



Pause for thought

We last see Candy lying down in the hay, covering his face with his arm in despair at the end of Section 5. Is your sympathy for him lessened by his lack of sympathy for Curley’s wife?





Pause for thought

Do you see the boss as a sufficiently realistic character? Do you feel that he has individuality, or does Steinbeck just present him as a typical employer?



The boss is not portrayed as particularly harsh or exploitative. In fact, he is better than some. He gives his men whisky to get drunk on at Christmas. He is said to take his anger out on Crooks, the black stable buck, at times, but at least he keeps him on at the ranch. He also continues to employ Candy, who is old and not much use as a worker. It is presumably the boss who has paid Candy a sum of money in compensation for losing his hand.

The boss suspects George of exploiting Lennie, but this suggests that he has a sense of justice.

Curley

Curley, the boss's son, has little to recommend him. He is aggressive and yet cowardly — Carlson calls him 'yella as a frog belly' (A90, P68) — mean-minded, vengeful and jealous. The best we can say about him is that he might have been a nicer man had he been a bigger one: he has an inferiority complex because of his size.

He makes the most of being the boss's son, ordering George and Lennie around. However, he is cowed by Slim's status and afraid of Carlson, which is why he picks on Lennie, who he thinks will be an easy target. When Lennie crushes Curley's hand, Curley could have Lennie 'canned' (fired). However, Slim knows Curley well enough to prevent this, telling Curley, 'I think you got your han' caught in a machine' (A92, P70). If Curley tells anyone it was Lennie, Slim will make sure that Curley becomes a laughing stock.

Candy says that Curley keeps one hand in a glove full of vaseline in order to keep it soft for his wife. If this is true, it suggests that Curley likes to think of himself as a good lover. However, he does not seem to be loving towards his wife. They have been married for only a short time, yet he leaves her alone on the ranch on a Saturday night to visit a brothel with the ranch hands. He is jealously suspicious that she might take an interest in other men. When she dies, his reaction is not grief at losing her but anger and a desire for revenge: 'He worked himself into a fury. "I'm gonna get him. I'm going for my shotgun. I'll kill the big son-of-a-bitch myself"' (A133, P105). He seems to see his wife as a possession that has been stolen from him.

Curley's wife

Her identity

The first thing you may notice about Curley's wife is that she is never called anything else. Unlike the other main characters, she is never given

Grade booster

Don't be afraid to criticise Steinbeck. For example, you could argue that Curley is not a fully rounded, believable character. Do you think it is a weakness in Steinbeck's characterisation that Curley has no good points?



a proper name. There is some room for your personal interpretation here. However, Steinbeck probably wants to show that the ranch hands never see her as a real person with an identity of her own. Rather, they see her as something belonging to Curley. This is partly because they do not want to risk their jobs by being friendly to her and upsetting Curley.

Ironically, we never actually see Curley and his wife together except when she is dead. They make occasional appearances looking for each other, but they never find each other. Curley's jealous suspicion makes him look for her, and she probably looks for him out of boredom. This is one of the things that makes her a somewhat pathetic figure.

'A tart'?

If you answer an exam question about Curley's wife, you should think about how Steinbeck wants us to see her. To what extent should we believe in what other characters say about her? Before we meet her in person, we hear about her from Candy. He tells George that he has seen her 'give Slim the eye' (look lustfully at him), and that she is 'a tart' (A49–50, P30–31).

When we meet Curley's wife in person, Steinbeck reinforces the negative image created by Candy. It seems a bad sign that her first appearance blocks out the light: 'the rectangle of sunshine in the doorway was cut off. A girl was standing there looking in' (A53, P34). Her physical appearance also reinforces Candy's view: 'She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages.' Even her 'nasal, brittle' voice makes her seem unpleasant. Her body language seems sexually provocative: 'She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward.' However, Lennie's gaze makes her feel uncomfortable, so any sexuality in her body language may be unconscious.

George condemns her as soon as she leaves the bunk house: 'Jesus, what a tramp' (A54, P35). Whit appreciates her looks: 'Well, ain't she a looloo?' (A78, P56) but still criticises her for not hiding her sexuality ('She ain't concealin' nothing') and for looking at the men ('She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody'). The only person who is pleasant to her is Slim, and even he focuses on her looks: 'Hi, Good-lookin'' (A54, P35).

The worst of Curley's wife

We see the worst of Curley's wife when she is bored and lonely on a Saturday night and visits Crooks's room. As usual, she says she's looking for Curley, and as usual she is 'heavily made up' (A109, P84). At first, she

Grade **booster**

Be aware that, in his portrayal of Curley's wife, Steinbeck may be making a point about men in American society not regarding women as individuals.



Grade **booster**

Note cultural context. Candy's view of Curley's wife may reflect the sexual double standards of American society in the 1930s: it is all right for the men to visit a brothel, but if a bored and unhappy young woman looks with any interest at another man, she is 'a tart'.



Pause for thought

Do you think Steinbeck's portrayal of Curley's wife is sexist, or is he just commenting on the sexism of the period?





smiles at the men — Crooks, Lennie and Candy — but when she fails to get a friendly response she comments, “They left all the weak ones here.” Then she comments, perceptively, that when the men are together they are afraid to be friendly to her, each worried that the other will ‘get something’ on him (have something to threaten him with — telling Curley).

We see the misery of her marriage when she complains bitterly about Curley, who only seems interested in what he is going to do to all the people he dislikes. She is pleased that his hand has been crushed, and she admires Lennie for doing it. However, she is unsympathetic to the three men, clearly using them only to relieve her boredom. She ‘contemptuously’ calls them ‘a bunch of bindle stiff[s] [homeless men carrying all their possessions in a bundle] — a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep’ (A111, P86). But she is also indignant that they refuse to tell her what really happened to Curley’s hand.

Although it is easy to feel some sympathy with Curley’s wife in this scene, it becomes harder when she threatens to get Crooks lynched. She is voicing the racism of the time, but she is also asserting herself over the one person who is clearly below her in the ranch pecking order, and whom she can therefore threaten without fear of consequences, giving herself some slight sense of power and status.

Key quotation

**‘I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny.’
(A113, P88–89)**



When Curley’s wife makes the mistake of letting Lennie stroke her hair, it is probably out of a mixture of sympathy and vanity

The best of Curley’s wife

Steinbeck’s portrayal of Curley’s wife is at its most sympathetic just before she dies, in the scene in the barn with Lennie. We see that her dreams are even more hopeless than those of George and Lennie. As she hinted in the earlier scene in Crooks’s room, she has dreams of becoming famous. First, she was prevented by her mother from joining a travelling show. Then she met a man who promised to put her ‘in the movies’ in Hollywood (A124, P96). Pathetically, she believes her mother must have stolen the man’s letter, since he promised to write. This is why she has settled for marrying Curley.

Grade booster

Don’t fall into the trap of dismissing Curley’s wife in the way that the ranch hands do. It is important to be aware of her social context as a lone woman in 1930s California.



The disappointment that Curley's wife confides in Lennie, and the slight sympathy she shows him, makes it easier for us to sympathise with her. She tells Lennie: 'You're nuts. But you're a kinda nice fella. Jus' like a big baby. But a person can see kinda what you mean' (A126, P98). When she makes the fatal mistake of letting him stroke her hair, it is probably out of a mixture of sympathy and vanity.

Key quotation

Curley's wife: 'I coulda made somethin' of myself...Maybe I will yet.'
(A124, P96)

Slim

Slim plays an important role on the ranch and in the novel. He is a mule skinner — someone who drives the mules that pull carts, ploughs and other machinery on the ranch. Steinbeck presents him as evidence that noble qualities can be found in the humble working man. Whereas Curley has no virtues, Slim has no faults.

Text focus

Slim is first shown combing his 'long, black, damp [just washed] hair straight back' (A55, P36), showing that he is clean and well groomed. Steinbeck's description of him is almost too full of praise: 'he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen...the prince of the ranch...capable of killing a fly on the wheeler's butt with a bull whip without touching the mule.'

Slim has a natural authority and an 'understanding beyond thought'. His hands are 'as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer' (A56, P37). This is a surprising simile (an image comparing two things), given that Slim is a ranch worker. It helps to create a certain air of mystery about him, like his lean and ruggedly handsome ('hatchet') face that disguises his age: 'He might have been thirty-five or fifty.'

Above all, Slim is to be respected. When he speaks, a hush falls on the room. Even when he stands up, he does so 'slowly and with dignity' (A58, P39).

Slim shows tact and understanding when he speaks to George, and he somehow draws George out of himself without pressing him, so that George confides in him. He is similarly quick to understand and sympathise at the end of the novel, when George has to shoot Lennie. Steinbeck describes Slim as looking 'kindly' and speaking 'gently' (A56, P37). He is generous too, giving Lennie one of his pups and telling George 'No need to thank me about that' (A64, P42).

Pause for thought

What is your view of Slim? Is he too good to be true? Would he have more depth as a character if Steinbeck had given him a few faults?





Key quotation

Slim (on Lennie): 'He's a nice fella... Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around.' (A66, P44)

Despite being gentle and sensitive, Slim is also tough. When Curley annoys him by repeatedly asking about his wife, Slim is described as 'scowling', and he speaks angrily to Curley despite Curley being the boss's son: 'If you can't look after your own God damn wife, what you expect me to do about it? You lay offa me' (A89–90, P67–68). When Curley attacks Lennie, Slim is about to go to Lennie's defence until George stops him. After the attack, it is Slim who makes sure that Lennie will not get into trouble for crushing Curley's hand. It is also Slim who makes the important point that you don't have to be intelligent to be a 'nice fella'.

Crooks

Crooks is the stable buck — he looks after the horses and mules. He is introduced when Candy mentions to George that the boss takes his anger out on Crooks because he is black, explaining: 'Ya see the stable buck's a nigger' (A40, P21). In the routinely racist world of California in the 1930s, this passes for an explanation. For the men on the ranch, Crooks's colour is his defining feature. However, Candy does add that Crooks is a 'nice fella' and that he 'got a crooked back where a horse kicked him' (A41, P22). We also learn that he has a talent for the game of 'horseshoes', which the men play as a pastime.

Pause for thought

Candy says that Crooks 'don't give a damn' when the boss 'gives him hell' (A41, P22). Do you think Candy is right? Has Crooks learned to become thick-skinned or does he hide his feelings to avoid worse treatment?



Crooks is the focus of the fourth section in the novel. Steinbeck devotes one of his scene-setting section openings to Crooks's room. In the process, he tells us a lot about Crooks and his life. He has a room of his own because he is a relatively permanent skilled worker on the ranch, and because, being black, he is not allowed in the bunk house. Having his own room means he can have his possessions spread about it. Most of them relate to his work, such as a harness and leather-working tools. He does have a few personal possessions, although some of these also appear to be work-related: 'several pairs of shoes, a pair of rubber boots, a big alarm clock and a single-barreled shotgun' (A98, P73). His books and magazines, however, have nothing to do with work. They mark him out as an intelligent and literate man. His copy of the 'California civil code' suggests that he has an interest in justice even if he is unlikely to get it. His 'few dirty books' (A99, P74) are an interesting detail. It is unclear whether they are pornographic or just grubby.

Crooks keeps his room neat and clean, 'for Crooks was a proud, aloof man' (A99, P74). Steinbeck also tells us 'He kept his distance and demanded that other people keep theirs.' Crooks seems proud that he is not 'a southern negro' with a recent family history of slavery (A102, P77). His distance from others is accentuated by the fact that he is in pain much

of the time because of his spinal injury.

His first words in the section, to Lennie, support what Steinbeck has already told us about him: ‘You got no right to come in my room’ (A99–100, P74–75). He scowls at Lennie, but after a while he is softened by Lennie’s smile. He even seems to enjoy Lennie’s company: ‘A guy can talk to you an’ be sure you won’t go blabbin’ (A102–03, P77–78). He reveals that he is desperately lonely.

Despite apparently appreciating Lennie’s company, Crooks torments him by suggesting that George might not return from town. He tells Lennie that he would be taken to ‘the booby hatch’ (an insane asylum) and tied up like a dog (A104, P79). He enjoys exercising this small degree of power over Lennie and picturing him in a more powerless situation than his own.

Life has taught Crooks to be cynical and pessimistic. Hence he is at first scathingly dismissive when Lennie and Candy talk about the farm they are going to buy with George. However, it is as if he has to be like this to avoid the risk of raising his own hopes:

Crooks interrupted brutally. ‘You guys is just kiddin’ yourself. You’ll talk about it a hell of a lot, but you won’t get no land...I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand.’ (A108, P83)

Surprisingly, after this outburst Crooks allows himself to become hopeful. He hesitates, then offers to come and work on the farm ‘for nothing — just his keep’ (A109, P84). This moment of hope is immediately soured by the appearance of Curley’s wife in the doorway. None of the men wants her in the room, but when Crooks asserts his right to privacy, she threatens him. His reaction to this is dramatic (imagine how it might appear on stage):

Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself...Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. ‘Yes, ma’am...Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego — nothing to arouse either like or dislike. (A113–14, P88–89)

He is a proud man, but his survival instinct makes him become almost invisible. He puts on ‘layers of protection’ (A115, P90). When Curley’s wife goes, we see that Crooks’s hope has evaporated. He tells Candy ‘You guys comin’ in an’ settin’ made me forget. What she says is true.’ The reminder of his lack of rights returns him to his lack of hope, although he is too proud to admit the truth: ‘I didn’ mean it. Jus’ foolin’. I wouldn’ want to go no place like that’ (A116, P91).

Carlson

Carlson is described on his first entry as ‘a powerful, big-stomached man’ (A57, P38). He is fairly friendly but not very bright, as we see when he

Key quotation

Crooks on the human need for company: ‘It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all.’ (A103, P78)

Grade booster

Although there is still racial prejudice in our society, no one is in Crooks’s position, having to ‘reduce himself to nothing’ to avoid being lynched. Try to imagine what this would be like.





makes the obvious joke about Lennie (whose surname is Small), 'He ain't very small,' chuckling at his own joke and repeating it.

Carlson's main role in the novel is to badger Candy into allowing his old dog to be shot. Carlson does this himself. He is insensitive to Candy's feelings about the dog, being mostly concerned about its smell. However, to be fair to Carlson, he does suggest to Slim that he should give Candy one of his puppies, and he does argue that it would be a kindness to shoot the old dog.

We also see Carlson as a tough man who is not afraid of Curley. He calls him a 'God damn punk...yella as a frog belly' and threatens to kick his head off (A90, P68). However, we see his unintelligence and insensitivity again at the end of the novel. He wrongly assumes that it is Lennie who has taken his Luger pistol. After George has shot Lennie, Carlson ends the book with the uncomprehending question, 'Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' [bothering] them two guys?' (A149, P118). He fails to understand that George, and even Slim, could be upset by Lennie's death.

Grade **booster**

Carlson is given a realistic mixture of good and bad features. How do you think this compares with the portrayals of Slim and Curley?



Grade **focus**



How will you be assessed on character-based questions?

Grades G–D

In this range of grades, candidates' answers are likely to deal with the characters as if they were real people, with little awareness of their fictional nature. There might be detailed accounts of the ranch hands' actions, and comments about them being lonely or aggressive. At this level candidates tend not to discuss the dramatic roles of the characters.

The better candidates in this range will support comments with references to the text.

Grades C–A*

In this grade range examiners will expect to see that you know about the behaviour of the characters, but also that you realise that aspects of human nature can be seen in them. The best candidates will be equally able to discuss the characters as psychologically realistic creations and as representing elements of human nature, and to comment on how they reflect American culture in the 1930s.

Use Table 1 to give yourself a clearer idea of what makes the difference between types of responses.

Table 1

Character	Grade G–D	Grade C–A*
George	A clever little man who looks after Lennie even though this means he can't do what he wants.	Embodies the ideal of the noble working man, self-sacrificing and honest, co-dependent with Lennie.
Lennie	A big, strong, stupid man who likes soft things and gets into trouble a lot.	Represents animal nature (described as animal); has an instinctual awareness.
Crooks	Black cripple who likes to keep himself to himself.	'Proud and aloof man' who would like to have human contact but would rather reject it than be rejected.
Curley's wife	Vain, empty-headed woman who likes to flirt with the ranch hands and threatens Crooks with lynching.	Lonely, naive and disappointed woman; represents the situation of poor, uneducated women in 1930s America.

Review your learning

(Answers are given on p. 82.)

- 1 What incident made George stop playing jokes on Lennie?
- 2 Who do the following phrases describe?
 - a 'full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes'
 - b 'a tall, stoop-shouldered old man'
 - c 'His hatchet face was ageless.'
- 3 Who makes the following statements and to whom? What in your opinion does each statement reveal about the speaker?
 - a 'I could live so easy and maybe have a girl.'
 - b 'Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella.'
 - c 'Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land.'



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