

“The chief thing that makes readers read a novel or short story is the characters.” How far have writers in your study made their portrayal of character a matter of interest in the works?

Authors of fiction are often judged on their ability to portray fictional characters realistically through their interactions and dialogue. Many readers enjoy reading novels which feature characters they can relate to or who have similar experiences and emotional responses. When reading for fun, casual readers focus on the story and the characters, emphasizing plot and characterization when recommending books to friends. Authors use many techniques to portray nuanced, realistic and sophisticated characters in their prose fiction, including various types of descriptive imagery, narrative structure and a perspective which captures the voice of the characters. John Steinbeck, in his novel Of Mice and Men, creates realistic characters, archetypal characters and unrealistically ideal characters. Through the use of repeated animal imagery, symbols, and a character foil, Steinbeck’s portrayal of his characters presents a corrupted society and addresses the theme that friendship is impossible.

Steinbeck portrays George and Lennie realistically, using repeated animal imagery and symbols of loneliness to highlight the corrupt society they are living in and the impossibility of their friendship. Steinbeck repeatedly characterizes Lennie as an innocent victim of the corrupt society in which he lives by using animal imagery, presenting him as a lumbering, naïve animal, first likening him to a bear (19), then to a horse (20) and a terrier (26). When he isn’t comparing Lennie to large animals, Steinbeck portrays him with small, innocent animals, as he holds and strokes a mouse even after it dies (20-27), dreams of taking care of rabbits (33-34), and adopts one of Slim’s pups (68-69). Like an animal, Lennie reacts to situations based on instinct and his fear takes over, hindering him from knowing what to do. This instinctual reaction gets him in trouble in Weed, when George needed to “sock him over the head with a fence picket” so he would let go of the girl’s red dress (68) and again in the bunkhouse when Curley attacks him (92). By portraying Lennie as a lumbering beast who responds instinctively in dangerous situations, Steinbeck highlights the human corruption of their society and also the unusual nature of George and Lennie’s friendship. George, also, is depicted realistically, as Steinbeck uses the motif of loneliness to underscore his theme. Although George and Lennie are friends, Steinbeck frequently portrays George playing Solitaire in the bunkhouse, symbolizing his isolation within the individualized society he is trying to navigate. Even when he is talking with the other ranch-hands in the bunkhouse, George chooses to exclude himself from their debates, as he doesn’t “want to get mixed up in nothing” (81). Ultimately, although both characters face realistic challenges together, their friendship, like any friendship in this mercilessly corrupt society, cannot survive and George must kill Lennie for his own protection.

Steinbeck’s use of symbolism to present Curley’s wife as the archetypal dangerous female reinforces how widespread the corruption is in his society. Throughout the novel, Curley’s wife is an anonymous, symbolic figure and in fact she is never given a name. Before she enters the narrative, Candy describes her to George as a “tart,” referring to her only as Curley’s wife (50). Steinbeck further emphasizes her anonymity and sexually promiscuous behavior with his first presentation of her when she cuts off the light shining into the bunkhouse. By having her cut off the light, Steinbeck foreshadows that she will play a role in preventing George and Lennie’s best laid plans from coming to fruition and she symbolically destroys their hope. Her vivid description and repeated red coloring, from her “full, rouged lips” to her red fingernails, red mules and the “red ostrich feathers” which adorn them signal danger to George and Lennie and link her with the girl in Weed furthering the foreshadowing (53). By presenting Curley’s wife, the only female character in the novel, with symbols of danger instead of as a compassionate feminine source of solace, Steinbeck demonstrates that there is no respite from George and Lennie’s harsh reality.

Steinbeck uses contrast and hyperbole to present Slim as an unrealistically ideal character, who acts as a foil to the coarse, friendless characters who work at the ranch. Slim’s first appearance in the novel is marked by its use of contrast, drawing attention to him as an unrealistic paragon of virtue. Slim has an “ageless” face and his ears “hear more than was said.” Physically, he has “large, lean” hands yet they are “delicate... as those of a temple knave.” Slim is even capable of seemingly impossible tasks, as he “smooth[es] out his crushed hat” (56). Slim is repeatedly described as “Godlike,” with “calm” eyes and a “gentle,” “friendly” voice (66). Steinbeck uses these specific contrasts to emphasize Slim’s role as a foil to the other characters in this unforgiving world. He encourages confidence, does not encourage violence, and seems to be above the disagreements and everyday problems of the other ranch hands. Slim is also the only character who is able to understand the tragedy of the conclusion and the ultimate impossibility of George and Lennie’s friendship, as he discretely offers George the comfort and reassurance he needs in the cruel, individual world.

Steinbeck emphasizes his theme of loneliness and the impossibility of friendship in a corrupt society through his portrayal of realistic characters who are tragically fated to destroy the very friends that sustain them, archetypal characters who symbolize the evil and dangers of the world, and ideal characters who represent what could be. Steinbeck’s characters are all trying to achieve something better in their lives, yet are unable to successfully realize their dreams because of the nature of the individualized world in which they live. Even George and Lennie, seemingly well-prepared for their plan to “get a little place” as they have each other (“ ‘Because I got you an’ – ‘An’ I got you. We got each other, that’s what’” 145), cannot survive the brutally competitive world. Ultimately, neither Steinbeck’s realistic characters, his symbolic characters, nor his ideal characters can overcome the challenges inherent in a corrupt society as they must either die, be killed, or join the competitive struggle as an individual. Steinbeck’s bleak novel suggests that men can dream of a better future, but if they are confined to a corrupt society they cannot be successful.