

How is the character of **Lennie** important to the novel as a whole? (20)

The Great Depression took place following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929, affecting the world's economy in a way that hadn't been seen before. The financial crisis resulted in companies going out of business and mass unemployment overnight. At its peak, around 15 million people lost their jobs. To add insult to injury, the vast majority of banks collapsed at the same time, meaning that many people lost their entire life savings. Previously hard-working Americans, who had stable incomes were plunged into extreme poverty. This resulted in a 'survival of the fittest mentality, which had found its way into American culture. Everyone needed a friend, but instead of coming together as lonely souls in cooperation, many preyed on others in an act of self-embellished power and authority. In a fiercely competitive working environment, men would do anything to gain an advantage over their fellow men. This resulted in the worst parts of society becoming prevalent – with extreme examples of discrimination – including sexism and ageism an everyday part of society. As society struggled, the exploitation of the more vulnerable members of society was rife. Through the exploration of the themes of discrimination, loneliness and inevitability, Steinbeck uses the character of Lennie to comment on how society in the 1930s destroyed good people and the things they cared about the most.

Lennie is important to the novella as he is used by Steinbeck as a vehicle to explore the theme of *loneliness*. Americans in the 1930s adopted a 'survival of the fittest' mentality in which kindness and care for their fellow man was replaced with acts of hatred and exploitation. Any opportunity to exert influence and control over another individual was taken, as friendship became almost impossible. When Lennie enters Crooks' room in chapter 4, he does so out of curiosity and with kindness. Yet he is soon tormented by Crooks, as he says that the men will tie Lennie up *'like a dog'* if George ever leaves him, exemplifying the difficulty in forming genuine friendships. The animosity shown by Crooks shows that even the loneliest of characters were incapable of true friendship. Lennie's friendship with George, whilst destined to be destroyed, is the only example of true love that we see within the novella. Despite the mistreatment faced by characters like Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife, Lennie's relationship with George provides a rare glimpse of love and protection against loneliness. In the unstable job market of the 1930s, itinerant workers moved between ranches, leaving no room for lasting friendships. Lennie often reminds George, *"I've got you and you've got me,"* emphasizing the value of their companionship in an otherwise lonely world. Their symbiotic relationship offers a unique dynamic, with George guiding Lennie to avoid trouble, and Lennie providing much-needed company as they travel from ranch to ranch. This bond not only saves them from the isolation faced by others on the ranch but also serves as a beacon of hope amidst the harsh realities of the era.

Lennie, as a character with a mental disability, faces significant discrimination and mistreatment, reflecting the harsh realities of 1930s America. During this period, there was no welfare state, and those with disabilities were often overlooked and marginalised due to a lack of social support and understanding. The novella portrays Lennie's struggle to form relationships and the discrimination he encounters because of his disability. For instance, when Lennie enters Crooks' room, his friendly intentions are met with cruelty as Curley's Wife torments him by referring to him as a *'dum dum'*. This quotation demonstrates the challenges Lennie faces in establishing connections, as even the loneliest characters use his vulnerability against him. Lennie's treatment by other characters, such as Curley, further exemplifies the discrimination he experiences. Curley sees Lennie's size and disability as an opportunity to assert his authority, ultimately provoking a confrontation: *"Come on, ya big bastard. Get up on your feet. No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna laugh at me. I'll show ya who's yella"*. This hostility not only highlights the discrimination Lennie faces but also mirrors the broader societal attitudes towards those with disabilities during the 1930s.

The inevitability of tragedy in "Of Mice and Men" is intrinsically linked to Lennie's character, as his mental disability and lack of self-control foreshadow a tragic outcome against the backdrop of 1930s America. Throughout the novella, Lennie's unintentional harm to others, such as the killing of the puppy ("**Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard.**"), serves as a harbinger of the dire consequences that ultimately befall him. His inability to comprehend the implications of his actions and the harsh reality of the Great Depression exacerbate the tragic nature of his fate.

Lennie's relationship with George, while providing comfort and protection, also underscores the inevitability of tragedy. As George struggles to keep Lennie out of trouble, it becomes evident that their dream of owning a farm is an unattainable fantasy in a world that is unforgiving to those who are vulnerable. The tragic climax of the novella, where George is forced to kill Lennie to save him from a worse fate, exemplifies the tragic trajectory of their relationship.

To conclude, Lennie is important to the novella as he used as a vehicle to comment on how vulnerable members of society were treated in the 1930s. By presenting a character full of purity and innocence, Steinbeck demonstrates how it was inevitable that good people would suffer in the harsh world of 1930s America. Lennie is used to highlight how society influenced and fueled discrimination and hatred at the time, as any opportunity for an advantage over their fellow man was taken.



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