

## How is the character of Crooks important to the novella as a whole? (20)

The Great Depression, triggered by the 1929 Wall Street Crash, had far-reaching effects on the global economy. Companies collapsed, leading to mass unemployment, peaking at 15 million jobless Americans. Simultaneously, most banks failed, wiping out people's life savings, and plunging once-stable citizens into extreme poverty. The Dust Bowl, a severe sandstorm, further exacerbated the crisis by destroying farmers' lands, forcing many laborers to shift between jobs to survive. This instability led to loneliness and a competitive 'survival of the fittest' culture, resulting in widespread discrimination, including sexism and ageism. Amidst this, many were preyed upon, reinforcing the societal power dynamics. The harsh reality of 1930s America was further underlined by Jim Crow laws, adding racial discrimination to the mix. Steinbeck's character Crooks in his novel embodies these societal elements - the prevalent racism against black people, the pervasive loneliness, and the shattered American Dream. Crooks' experiences provide a stark illustration of how the American Dream often remained elusive, shattered by the harsh realities of the time.

Firstly John Steinbeck uses the character of Crooks to show the racism against the black people who had recently been released from slavery. This is evident from the start of the book when Candy tells George that Crooks 'gets it' from the Boss every time he is angry. Crooks is unable to do anything about it because he is a black man with a crippled back, who, if fired, will be unable to find work with anyone else. This is again displayed further on in the novel when Curley's wife claims that she can 'get [him] strung up so fast it ain't even funny' if he gets her 'into trouble'. This highlights the prevalence of racism in American society as it shows that black people were considered as less than married white women; despite women not being thought of highly in American society, but only as objects to admire and possess. Racism is also evident in Candy's use of the 'n' word when referring to Crooks, because, although Candy has no particular objection to Crooks, it shows that he views Crooks' position as justified and rightful or else he wouldn't dare to use that language. It is this casual racism that shows that Crooks would not have simply faced discrimination from the worst parts of society, but it was part of his everyday life.

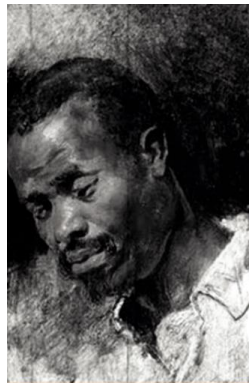
Crooks, the lone black man on the ranch, encapsulates the intense loneliness and racial discrimination rampant in 1930s America, illustrated vividly by Steinbeck in his novella. His isolation is both physical and social, confined to "a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn" - a symbol of his marginalization. His ostracization is further highlighted when he says, "Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black." His speech is filled with resentment, reflecting his enforced solitude due to the Jim Crow laws and societal norms of the time. Crooks is denied the camaraderie shared by the other ranch hands, a reality that fosters his loneliness. His interactions with others are minimal and often marred by racial slurs, as when Curley's wife threatens, "I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." The power dynamics and racial prejudice prevalent in 1930s America are starkly portrayed in these interactions.

Despite his yearning for companionship, evident when he allows Lennie into his room, Crooks is resigned to his solitude. His poignant statement, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody," encapsulates his profound loneliness, demonstrating the psychological impact of his isolation. Steinbeck thus uses Crooks to illuminate the harsh reality of loneliness and racial discrimination during the Great Depression.

Steinbeck portrays the realisation that the American Dream is nothing but an illusion through Crooks, despite initially being willing to join in with the dream with Lennie and Candy. However, when Curley's wife enters the room, he tells the others he was 'just fooling' showing that because Crooks has been subject to racism and prejudice for most of his life, it is easier for him to accept the futile nature of the American Dream. I think that whilst Crooks was able to forget that he was discriminated against, due to the company that was present, Lennie, 'a dum-dum' and Candy 'a lousy old sheep', he was able to believe in the dream. However, it was shattered as soon as reality pervaded the room in the form of Curley's wife, who has her own dream, that she thinks will come true unlike everyone else's.

Finally, Steinbeck uses Crooks to show the things that the black population of America dreamt about because as Lennie enters the room, Crooks is reading a book about civil rights and quotes its contents to him at the start of their conversation. 'You have no right being in a black man's room' shows that Crooks is considered low down on the social ladder but is also concerned about preserving what little dignity and self-respect he has left. He is eager to ensure that people don't violate his rights. Furthermore, he probably wants to be treated as a normal person, as he accepts the invitation to join the white workers in the bunkhouse at Christmas, even though they promptly pick a fight with him and use him as entertainment.

Overall, I think that Steinbeck uses the character of Crooks to show the main problems with American society in the 1930s, particularly towards black people and towards lower class workers and people who didn't have a lot of money.



Crooks