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# Apartheid and Prejudice

By: Kenna Wendt

Discrimination, as defined by the dictionary, is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex. Throughout time, people have been faced with the grisly actuality of discrimination in society. Even today in our modern world you cannot turn on a television, search the web, or read a newspaper without witnessing accounts of inequality. Those who choose to behold these injustices do not have to search for long, simply the touch of a screen can send the mind spiraling into narratives of discrimination and prejudice. Debates, discussions, and full blown arguments are featured daily on newscasts. Discrimination is among one of the most discussed topics in politics today, especially evident in the recent comments from our very own President of the United States that clearly favor one race over the other. Many important issues debated in society boil down to discrimination, the most commonly known probably being racism. Did you know 95% of African Americans believe that they are discriminated against (NPR). 55% of white Americans think they are discriminated against (TIME magazine). 68% of women think that there is discrimination against women in America still today (NPR). Discrimination can have disastrous results on personal health and functionality as a society. This is generally the idea Steinbeck is trying to convey in his novel, *Of Mice and Men*. In the novel, Steinbeck follows the lives of two ranch workers, Lennie Small and George Milton. Lennie is mentally disabled and relies on George to help him through life.

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck demonstrates how the less powerful are discriminated against by society through the characters of Crooks, an African American stable buck, Candy, an aging ranch worker, Lennie, a mentally disabled laborer, and Curley's Wife, a woman defined by the relationship with her husband.

One example of racial discrimination is the character of Crooks, an African American stable buck working on the ranch. In one instance, Crooks is speaking to Lennie and Curley's wife in his room, right outside of the stables. Curley's wife is being rather hostile towards Crooks, and states, "Well, you best keep your place then, nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny," (81). This is an important example of how Curley's wife, who has a higher rank in society because of her place on the ranch as Curley's partner, treats Crooks, a black ranch hand who is looked down upon in this time period. Curley's wife threatening Crooks shows the amount of power she has over him, though she is discriminated against herself. Another good case of this happening is in the same instance, before Curley's wife comes into the picture. Crooks is speaking to George about how hard it is for him to function on the ranch, and says, "S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunkhouse and play rummy cuz you was black(...)" (72). Crooks is talking about how he isn't permitted to go into the bunkhouse where the other men stay because of the color of his skin. This also ties into how lonely Crooks is, and how much he envies George and Lennie's companionship. He isn't allowed in town or where the other men stay based on the color of his skin, and even has a room separated from everyone else, near a pile of horse manure.

The symbol of Crook's discrimination is his room. This really shows just how separated Crooks is from the rest of the ranch, and the rest of the men. He lives next to the stables, where he cares for the animals. One important thing to note is that all of the other men on the ranch live together, in a bunkhouse. Crooks is the only one to live alone, minus the boss and Curley, though there is a significant difference. The boss and Curley live alone because they are powerful and possess enough power and money to live that way, while Crooks is forced to live that way because he is black. Segregation was and still is a huge issue in our society today, and is obviously in this book and time period. Crooks is forced to reside in this room, while, as he tells Lennie, he would much rather have companionship and live with the other men. He specifically points out his books distastefully as bad company, and wishes for fellowship. Crooks is lonely, but is forced to be by society, and the men on this ranch.

Candy is an aged ranch worker who is also discriminated against on this ranch, but for a different reason than Crooks. Candy is discriminated against because of his age, and the physical disabilities that come with that age. Those on the ranch think he is useless, and he believes he is not needed anymore, and that that will lead to his expulsion from the ranch. An example of this is when Lennie and George are explaining their dream to Candy, and Candy states, "I got hurt four years ago(...). They'll can me purty soon. Jus' as soon as I can't swamp out no bunkhouses they'll put me on the country," (61). This is an example of how disposable the ranch owner thinks Candy is, and how the powerful boss treats Candy, a crippled, aging, poor ranch hand. Another example of Candy's discrimination is when Curley's wife is in Crooks's room

with Lennie and Candy, and Curley's Wife threatens to "get Crooks strung up on a tree". Candy immediately stands up for Crooks, claiming that, "If you was to do that, we'd tell." Curley's wife tells them that, "Nobody'd listen to you an' you know it. Nobody'd listen to you." This is obviously connected to the men's place on the ranch, specifically at Candy. She believes she can treat him however she likes because no one cares about the opinions or feelings of an old, disabled ranch worker. This is a good example of how the powerful, Curley's wife in this situation, treats the less powerful, Candy.

Lennie is one of the main characters in this story, and from the beginning it is clear that he isn't the usual hero we find in our childhood fairytales. Like the previous characters in the novel, Lennie is discriminated against inside and outside of the ranch. Although we don't actually get a peek into the mind of Lennie Small till the end of the novel, Steinbeck makes it evident from the beginning that Lennie has some sort of mental disabilities. He does this by taking us through a small portion of his life, where we experience his actions and the way he is treated in society. This type of discrimination, called ableism, is still a hugely controversial topic in our world today, and it most definitely was in Steinbeck's too. Steinbeck explores in his novel the different types of discrimination that exist in our world, then and now, and includes them in the telling of Lennie and George's experiences. There are countless examples of ableism in *Of Mice and Men*, but the most prominent is just in Lennie's everyday life. Lennie is constantly treated differently because of his disabilities, and the trouble they tend to cause.

Then, there is Curley's wife. She is an interesting character, to say the least, because she represents both sides of

discrimination. She, at first, is shown in a position of power over the men on the ranch, the power coming from being Curley's wife. But at closer glance, she herself is discriminated against, especially by the fact that she is Curley's wife. The very thing that brings her control over others is also the thing that brings her no dominance over her own life. The men on the ranch sneer behind her back, calling her a "tart" or "tramp". These accusations originate from the fact that she is the only woman on the farm, and looks to men for company. In the beginning, most audiences would believe she was a flirt, just by the small scene and rumors we had read about on the ranch. However, it becomes most pronounced towards the end of the story, when she speaks to Lennie in the barn. She says, "I don' like Curley. He ain't a nice fella.(...) I coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes-all them nice clothes like they wear." (89) This is important to Curley's wife because it shows she is more than just a flirt, and that she had aspirations and dreams. Another example is when George is warning Lennie about her. When he says, "Ranch with a bunch of guys ain't no place for a girl, 'specially like her," he means that the ranch a bunch of men work on isn't a welcoming place for Curley's wife.(13) There are numerous examples of this injustice throughout Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, however the most obvious is likely her name.

The symbol of the discrimination against Curley's wife is absolutely her name, or her lack of name to be more exact. Throughout the story, she is referred to nothing more than "Curley's Wife", and a few other crude insults not worth mentioning. I believe Steinbeck excludes her name from his novel for a reason. If I had to make a guess, I would say it's to further make an example of the idea her name has no value in this time

period. Her name isn't important, simply her relationship with her husband is. The way she is defined by Curley is one of the largest examples of discrimination in *Of Mice and Men*. She even expresses to Lennie at the end of her short life that it wasn't her plan to marry Curley, and yet now she is bound by her relationship to him. One of the main issues is, it's not as if no one on the ranch knows her name. They just don't feel it's important to use it, because it is just like if she was an object. Just Curley's property, just Curley's wife.

Steinbeck's message in *Of Mice and Men* delves much deeper into the discrimination our society faces today and has faced in the past, mainly through the aforementioned characters like Lennie, Curley's Wife, Crooks, Candy, and the symbolism each one represents. Discrimination is an important issue in our society because it affects the dynamic of our world as a whole. Even back in the 1930's Steinbeck is trying to convey this idea through his novel *Of Mice and Men*. There are many lessons we can take away from this book, though I believe the most prominent may be the idea of how discrimination affects lives. True, we have come far from the days that Steinbeck is referring to. But in some ways, nothing has changed. Discrimination is still alive and thriving in our communities, though not even close to how severe it used to be. Who is to say what the future may be like? Optimism provides us with a hope that in the future things will change for the better. However, as history and reality show us, it may get worse before things can begin to improve. The only way to make certain that discrimination is never to come knocking at our doors again is to teach ourselves, and our children different morals. Sure, it may take generations before discrimination and prejudice and bigotry

are completely wiped from our world, but the result will be worth it all. So, if we begin to believe and teach divergently than what we have been exposed to, we can avoid inequality in the distant future.

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