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## The Theme of Loneliness in Of Mice and Men

Loneliness is debatably one of the most horrible feelings existent within society. It strikes every living soul at one point or another, as it takes an immensely deep emotional toll. A profound part of what contributes to the feeling of loneliness is a lack of emotional empathy from others. Loneliness has the power to jade one's perception and mindset drastically, thus wreaking detrimental effects on one's behavior, and ultimately changing him or her as a person as well. Throughout the novel *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck portrays the prevalent theme of loneliness, along with the pervasive toll that it takes, through the depth of his characterization of George, Curley's wife, and Crooks.

One of the first characters in the novel who was struck by the effects of loneliness was George Milton. For the longest time, George has been Lennie's caretaker since Lennie suffered from mental retardation and was unable to care for himself. A significant disadvantage of being Lennie's caretaker was that Lennie always unknowingly gets himself into major trouble, thus causing both him and George to lose every job they get. As a result, they never stayed in any one place for long, so George never got the chance to develop relationships with anyone, which was one contributing factor to his loneliness. In addition, he was not fond of many ranch hands either, stating, "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time" (Steinbeck 41). George expressed his frustration with the other ranch hands, and it was obvious that he does not have a solid friendship with any of them. Two ranch hands he particularly never got along with were Curley and Carlson. Curley and Carlson were very emotionally superficial people who were not in touch with anyone's emotions. After George killed Lennie in the final scene, Carlson noticed that he was saddened by Lennie's death and responded by saying, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?" (107). This lack of empathy created a barrier between George and Carlson, along with other men like Carlson, for they cannot emotionally connect or forge a friendship due to the lack of understanding.

The only person that George did genuinely care for and view as a friend was Lennie. However, due to Lennie's mental condition, he only served as physical company to George; despite how George always told him that they have each other, George was never able to connect with Lennie on any kind of deep, emotional level since Lennie had the mindset of a child. Therefore, George was often very lonely on emotional terms. His sense of loneliness was often conveyed through his solitaire games; he was so lonely that he had to play a card game on his own. Finally, at the end of the novel, George lost his only source of consistent care and company when he had to shoot his own companion and only true friend. At that point, George lost something even more vital than just Lennie; he lost his unique purpose in life as well. This was

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George's final onset, for he has now reached his full capacity of loneliness and discontent in life, which is an empty void dusted with crushed dreams of false hope that can never again be filled.

Another character diseased by the prevalence of loneliness was Curley's wife. She married Curley, but despises him, for she never loved him. She does not like talking to Curley, and with no one else on the ranch to talk to, she has sunken into an abyss of loneliness. Her loneliness took a drastic toll on her behavior towards others. She was so eager for attention that she would go as far as acting inappropriately flirtatious, malevolently cruel, or even overtly insecure. She often roamed around the ranch, asking various men if they have seen Curley around. She behaved in a seductive manner, while always making sure that she looked her best, for 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. She wore a cotton housedress and red mules, on the steps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers" (Steinbeck 31). She does so, because she was so desperate for attention that she felt as if this was the only way that she can receive attention from others. However, unfortunately for Curley's wife, most of the ranch hands treated her with hostility and tried to ignore her to avoid getting themselves in trouble. Her loneliness has also led to her occasional sadistic behavior as well. Since her loneliness made her so unhappy and insecure, her ego was sometimes fed by deliberately insulting and condescending towards others, like how she did to Lennie, Candy, and Crooks when she tried to degrade them by calling them "a bunch of bindle stiffs—a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep" (71). By putting down others, Curley's wife reassured herself that there are people with lives worse than hers, which ultimately gave her a temporary ego boost and made her feel better about herself for the time being. This proved how insecure she was about herself. However, at root, her intentions were not purely malevolent; she was just an empty, lonely soul in need of a friend to talk to. She even said so herself when she confessed to Lennie, "I get lonely. You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?" (87). Her loneliness clearly took a heavy emotional toll on her, leaving her feeling insecure and deeply saddened, in addition to altering her personality into one that is oftentimes seductively malevolent. It seemed as if her only goal in her daily life was to roam around looking for someone to give her attention, for that was all she was ever shown doing. The sad part was that despite all of her efforts, Curley's wife always failed to find a friend who was willing to talk to her, thus leaving her abyss of loneliness open to even more wear and erosion; this was a pain that was only able to be terminated in death.

One of the loneliest characters in the novel was Crooks, the black stable buck. His immense loneliness was due to the white ranch hands' prejudice and discrimination against blacks. Unlike everybody else, Crooks was forced to sleep alone in his own room, whereas all of the other men slept in the bunkhouse. To add, the men never invite Crooks to play cards with them or go out with them to town either. As a result, Crooks's forced isolation and deep void of

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loneliness has taken detrimental effects on his character and perception of others. His loneliness turned him into a very cold and bitter soul, and he often shies away in reaction to others, because no one has ever been kind enough to him to make him feel comfortable enough to open up. His superficial hardness served as a defense mechanism to protect his insecurely weak and vulnerable self hiding beneath his exterior. Due to his loneliness, he often lost his grasp of who he really was, so he took on a different persona instead. He was so used to being in isolation that he could not help but respond in a harsh and hostile manner when Lennie peaked into his doorway: "You got no right to come in my room. This here's my room. Nobody got any right in here but me" (Steinbeck 68). In addition, Crooks's persistent loneliness opened up the gate that led him to become slightly sadistic at one point as well. After talking to Lennie for a while, Crooks realized that Lennie has a mental condition, thus giving Crooks the upper hand in regards to intelligence and common sense. He used this to his advantage and emotionally tortured Lennie by telling him that George may have gotten hurt and might not come back. Crooks's ego was temporarily satisfied by prying on Lennie's weakness. All of his life, he has been treated as if he were less than human, and he has been vulnerable to everyone, which has sunken him into a deep depression of loneliness; now, the tables have turned for a moment, and it was Lennie who was currently vulnerable to him. After Crooks realized that he should not try to trick Lennie anymore, he owned up to his loneliness, and even admitted that "a guy needs somebody?to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya. I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" (72-73). Crooks openly admitted to how he gets sick of being so lonely, and just as soon as he finally managed to open up and expose himself to the outside world, he emotionally withdrew back within himself just as quickly, for having permanent company and a real chance of surfacing from his abyss of loneliness was too good to be true.

The prevalence and pervasiveness of loneliness was adequately conveyed through the darkened depth of George, Curley's wife, and Crooks in John Steinbeck's riveting novel, *Of Mice and Men*. Loneliness is a uniquely painful feeling that exudes an aura of emptiness, in which plagues its victims. The feeling of loneliness is so powerful that it has the power to jade people of life, as well as take a detrimental toll on one's emotional mindset, just as it has for George, Curley's wife, and Crooks. Loneliness drew George and Crooks even deeper into their abyss, leading them down a path to emotional destruction. On the other hand, loneliness drew Curley's wife too far away from herself as her cries of desperation for attention were only answered in death. One of the most significant factors that contributed to all of the characters' loneliness was their lack of empathy and emotional understanding for each other. It was quite ironic that despite how loneliness struck nearly everyone, no one seemed to understand each other's loneliness. Their loneliness has emotionally isolated them so drastically to the point where they are no longer sensitive to the emotions of others, and even sometimes, themselves. It is truly disheartening to see how pervasive and powerful the effects of loneliness are. For these characters, the prevalence of loneliness will only continue to ravenously eat away at their

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lives as their empty voids still yearn to be filled.

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