

Of Mice and Men Controlled Assessment

Question: Explore the ways the theme of thwarted dreams and aspirations is developed in *Of Mice and Men*

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a novel centring on the efforts of the main protagonists George and Lennie to achieve the American dream, to be your own man. The idea of being completely independent is a very important thing to many of the characters in the novel.

This dream is portrayed by Steinbeck as unattainable throughout the book, with one of the characters Crooks stating that he had "...seen hundreds of men come by on the road and on the ranches, with their bindles on their back and that same damn thing in their heads". At this time Lennie had just revealed to Crooks his plan to get land with George and Candy. Crooks, as well as other characters throughout the novel state that everyone has this same dream in their head and that no one ever achieves it in the end.

This use of repetition by Steinbeck is an extremely effective way of making the dream seem impossible and reinforcing the theme of thwarted dreams as it repeats over and over again that the American dream wanted by so many is obtained by so few. This repetition works by making the goal of getting their own land seem almost like a story or a far off fantasy than an attainable goal. By making their dreams almost a work of fiction it discredits it and forces the reader to see their pursuit as futile.

Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing in the novel is another way that the author illustrates the theme of thwarted dreams to the reader. Foreshadowing is used right from the outset in the first couple pages of the book. When George is talking to Lennie about what Lennie should do when they arrive at the ranch in Soledad George states that Lennie "...ain't gonna do no bad things like in weed." This immediately implies that Lennie has done bad things in the past, and is likely to do bad things throughout the course of the book. This inevitability of failure is repeated throughout the book when George becomes increasingly worried about Lennie ruining their chances of making their dream. This is shown after Lennie broke Curley's hand. George's first reaction before checking if Lennie is all right is to ensure that they will still get their money "Slim, will we get canned now? We need the stake. Will Curley's old man can us now?" This shows that this dream has gone too far and warped George's priorities. Steinbeck immediately makes the book an exercise in futility by making the prospect of failure in their dream inevitable from the very beginning.

Another way in which Steinbeck explores his theme of thwarted dreams is the way that the protagonists' dreams become more and more wild and their belief becoming even stronger. Throughout the book George's advice to keep quiet and his immediate guarded response to Candy's enquiries about the ranch that George and Lennie were talking about purchasing breaks down and he gets lost in the hope of finally achieving their dream. Throughout the book the dream takes on a gravitational aspect, attracting two of the most downtrodden people on the ranch, Candy and Crooks. Both of these men also show an interest, willing to

buy in he dreams of George and Lenny. Their fantasies become more palpable throughout the book and as people join in on their dream. In the beginning of the book the dream is a modest one; to have their own land, a few crops and a couple rabbits for them to earn their own keep. When Candy signs on to this dream they speak a lot more freely about their dreams to the other characters, for instance Candy tells Crooks that "We're gonna have a dog an' rabbits an' chickens. We're gonna have green corn an' maybe a cow or a goat." This shows that they genuinely believe that they're gonna do it a lot more than the used to. The fact that these people are all interested shows that this is a universal dream in the book, a dream that never is shown by Steinbeck to have come true. Another thing to note is that only the two people who are most demoralised buy into this dream, the rest treating as a beggars dream that has no chance of coming true and that the men are fools for believing that this dream could ever amount to anything other than outright failure.

Steinbeck reinforces this idea that this dream is more of a fool's wish than a genuine goal with a hope of achievement in the final pages of the book. Just moments before Lenny is shot and killed by George, Lenny asks to be told about their dream and George agrees to this partially as a service to Lenny and partially to get Lenny in a position for George to shoot him without Lenny realising what is happening. Just before George pulls the trigger Lenny says to George that they should "... do it now, Le's get that place now". This is Steinbeck's way of imposing that in the end every other time that they said they were going to do it was just as futile as it is now with a gun to Lenny's head. This is a powerful and effective way of Steinbeck influencing the readers' thoughts to focus on the futility and the fact that all of the main characters dreams have been broken and had in the end always been a blind hope never to come to fruition. The fact that the characters hold on to their ambitions despite them being ridiculously unlikely and in cases impossible to actually work out is very showing of Steinbeck's main theme that the dreams of the people in America in this time period were just as futile as in the book and that even outside of Steinbeck's fiction the effects of broken dreams were being felt.

Curley's wife is one of Steinbeck's key tools in emphasise his theme of thwarted dreams. At two points in the book she tells the characters that she could have made something of herself, saying that "... a guy tol' me he could put me in pitchers..." She also says to Lenny that she would have liked to run away with a show but was stopped by her mother on account that she was only fifteen. All of these dreams that Curley's wife has had, but none of them had ever come true for her, the constant repetition of the fact that she could have made something of herself is employed by Steinbeck to create an even wider view on this theme of thwarted dreams that could never come true. Curley's wife is also being constantly oppressed by other sources other than just the general oppression of the society she lives in. Curley himself is one of the main causes of this as he is the one who prevents her from being free to follow her dreams and prevents her from even experiencing happiness as he forces her to stay at home and to not talk to the other people on the ranch. This oppression is also extended onto Crooks as he shares similar dreams as the rest of the characters, but his dreams are almost even more futile than the rest because of the oppression that he experiences from society at large. Crooks is treat exactly as a black man would have been at this time, not allowed to sleep with the white man and constantly insulted whether directly

or indirectly by the characters for his skin colour. This prejudice is what dissuades him from the idea of getting land with George and Lenny after originally being excited at the prospect of being treated as an equal. It is also interesting Steinbeck chose Curley's wife to be the one to deliver this prejudice considering she is one of the ones prejudiced against.

Yet another way that Steinbeck embodies the key theme of thwarted dreams is the very last line of the book that is delivered immediately after Lenny has been killed. George and Slim are walking away to go get a drink, both being upset at Lenny's death. Carlton after seeing them trudge away says "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them to guys?" This indifference to the death of Lenny by Carlton is Steinbeck's way of imitating the idea of society that emotional attachments are worthless and that any emotional tie is not important, the fact that Carlton is apathetic about this shows that his dreams were thwarted long ago, or maybe that he had no dreams to begin with. All of the workers on the farm have no real emotional attachments to any one, there are no kids, wives or family because these things are deemed as worthless in living the expected way for these men. The only emotional attachment that should be present is Curley's with his wife. However it is shown that their relationship is loveless and void of emotion. This effect of isolation is used to show that all of the characters' dreams have been torn apart and thrown away because they are useless to their lives.

Steinbeck's use of language devices such as repetition and foreshadowing and his use of plot structure to emphasise the main theme of thwarted dreams on to the reader is extremely effective in concisely enthusing Steinbeck's ideas about the society that he lived in that had led to so many broken dreams, and questioning the prejudices that had led to too many people's dreams being denied.