

How does Steinbeck present and develop the theme of death?

Death is a central theme in the novella 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck. Its recurrence throughout the novella demonstrates the transient nature of happiness and contentment in this society.

Steinbeck structures his novella around a series of deaths building towards the shooting of Lennie which concludes the story. This trail of death begins insignificantly with Lennie petting a dead mouse, setting the pattern for his later, tragically uncontrolled desire to touch soft things. He is at pains to assert his innocence saying 'I didn't kill it. Honest. I found it. I found it dead.' Steinbeck's use of short sentences underlines Lennie's panic, foreshadowing his mood when he kills Curley's wife. The deaths of Lulu's four drowned puppies, Candy's dog, Lennie's puppy and Curley's wife follow in quick succession reaching a crescendo with the death of Lennie.

Although Lennie is responsible for the deaths of his puppy and Curley's wife his attitude to death remains strikingly innocent. When his rough play kills his puppy he is bemused, wondering 'Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice?' Through this reminder of the dead mouse in the opening pages of the novella, Steinbeck highlights the sequence of death and his non-standard expression portrays Lennie's simple, childish outlook. His accidental murder of Curley's wife elicits a similar response. He tells himself 'I done a bad thing, I done another bad thing.' Steinbeck's skilful repetition here is crucial as the additional word 'another' makes it clear that Lennie equates the killing of a human with his earlier killings of animals. This is further shown when he tries to hide the death of the puppy commenting 'I'll throw him away. It's bad enough like it is.' He has no understanding that the death of the puppy is inconsequential in comparison to killing Curley's wife.

This event ultimately leads to Lennie's death when George carries out a mercy killing to prevent Lennie being lynched or locked away. It is also evidence of Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing and meticulous plotting to expose the impossibility of the men escaping their fate. The death of Curley's wife has brought the novella full circle; just before the events in the book Lennie was almost killed for a similar event in Weed when he grabbed hold of another red clothed, pretty girl. Although he did not kill this precursor of Curley's wife, there are many similarities in his interactions with the two women. Lennie just

escaped death at the start of the novella when 'they was lookin' for us, but they didn't catch us' but this time the lynching party will not let him live. It seems that he is fated not to live for long, propelled on by a relentless sequence of deaths to his own demise.

Another key aspect of deaths in 'Of Mice and Men' is the way that death is taken for granted. When his wife dies Curley shows little concern for her, never commenting on the tragedy of her premature death. His only response is to blame Lennie and seek revenge, saying 'I'm gonna get him.' Likewise Candy is expected to kill his dog for practical reasons without considering the emotional impact of losing his sole companion. 'He ain't no good to you, Candy. An' he ain't no good to himself. Why'n't you shoot him, Candy,' advises Carlson, reflecting society's lack of consideration for the old and needy - a message that hits the old and needy Candy particularly hard.

The constant presence of death in the novella provides a devastating criticism of this society. When Curley's wife dies it does not merely lead to the death of Lennie but also the death of the American Dream as the hopes of George, Candy and Crooks are likewise shattered. Steinbeck's foreshadowing and use of parallels are truly effective in showing both the tragedy and the futility of death.