

NATIONAL 5 CRITICAL ESSAY EXEMPLAR – ‘OF MICE AND MEN’

Prose: Characterisation, setting, language, key incidents, climax, turning point, plot, structure, narrative technique, theme, foreshadowing

Choose a novel or a short story or a work of non-fiction which explores an important theme.

By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the author has explored this theme.

A novel which explores the important theme of dreams and aspiration is ‘Of Mice and Men’ by John Steinbeck. Set in California during the Great Depression, it follows two farmhands - George Milton and Lennie Small - as they try to realise their dream of owning a rabbit farm. Lennie is intellectually disabled, and needs George’s constant support and protection. However, in the harsh society they live in this proves impossible, and their dream ends when George has to kill Lennie in an act of mercy. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck explores the theme of aspiration by showing how trying – or failing – to realise their dreams affects the characters’ personalities and actions.

The main way Steinbeck explores the theme of dreams is through George and Lennie’s dream of one day owning a rabbit farm. At the beginning of the novel, when the two men are on their way to Soledad, George says that having this goal sets them apart from other itinerant farmhands, who ‘ain’t got nothing to look ahead to’. George has told the story to Lennie enough that Lennie knows it off by heart, but as he describes their rabbit farm he speaks the words, ‘rhythmically as though he had said them many times before’. This shows that, even though Lennie is characterised as childlike and George as cynical and world weary, both men are equally invested in this goal, and both need it to help them get through their horrible circumstances. Through the rabbit farm, Steinbeck shows that dreams help people to survive, no matter how difficult achieving them seems.

Steinbeck also explores the transforming impact dreams can have on people. Crooks is psychologically restored when he becomes involved in George and Lennie’s dream. Crooks is a particular victim of the novel’s setting: black, he has suffered a lifetime of racism. When Crooks is introduced, Steinbeck characterises him as a bitter and cruel character who torments Lennie by pointing out risks and problems in George and Lennie’s plan: ‘Nobody ever gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land’. Crooks is nihilistic after a lifetime of isolation and disappointment. However, when Candy mentions that he’s putting in money, Crooks has reason to believe the dream might be possible and he quickly asks if he can join them, his previous bitterness disappearing. Steinbeck shows that faith in a dream can draw someone back from bitter hopelessness.

Candy is similarly affected by exposure to George and Lennie's goal. Like Crooks, Lennie, and Curley's wife, he is especially vulnerable in the harsh setting: he is old and maimed, and so will soon be unable to work. When his dog is symbolically killed – like Candy, his dog was old, crippled, and struggled to work – Candy sinks into despair. But, when he overhears George and Lennie talking about the rabbit farm, he begins to speak 'excitedly' and 'eagerly'. As with Crooks, some of the damage that the setting has done to Candy is healed by the idea of something better.

Before the novel's turning point, Steinbeck also explores the impact that failing to achieve one's dreams can have on someone. Curley's wife is initially characterised as simply cruel and manipulative, but when she's speaking to Lennie in the barn it becomes clear that she is as much a victim as anyone else in the story. She tells Lennie that someone from the film industry told her she was a 'natural': 'Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes – all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me.' Curley's wife aspired to be someone adored and admired, but instead she has ended up shut away by a possessive thug in an environment where the only company sees her as a danger because of her sex. Through Curley's wife, Steinbeck shows that such disappointment can have a corrosive effect on a person's behaviour.

However they impact people, Steinbeck ultimately uses the plot of 'Of Mice and Men' to explore the fragility of dreams. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that the rabbit farm will be a difficult thing to get, and it is also clear that Lennie cannot long survive the harsh setting. As George and Lennie's dream becomes more achievable, the signs that it will fall to pieces – Curley's bullying of Lennie; Curley's wife's tormenting of Lennie; Lennie's accidental killing of the puppy – begin to mount. Steinbeck carefully foreshadows Lennie's killing of Curley's wife throughout the novel, so that when it happens the audience is not surprised. Steinbeck shows that, even when our dreams seem just within reach, predictable problems can still destroy them completely.

Throughout 'Of Mice and Men', Steinbeck explores the theme of dreams and aspirations from several angles. He shows us how they can motivate people, how they can restore people, how they can bring out the better sides of people, how their failure can result in bitterness and depression, and how they can be easily destroyed. He skilfully builds up the reader's hope along with George, Lennie, Crooks, and Candy's, and like them we deliberately ignore the foreshadowing which hints at just how fragile their dream is.