Unbreakable Constraints

By

Jakob Hebebrand

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of AP English Literature
29 September 2017
Unbreakable Constraints

Thesis statement: In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck utilizes the characters of Curley’s wife, Crooks, and George to demonstrate the theme of the inequitable restrictions one faces and the attempts to overcome these restrictions in life.

I. Curley’s wife
   A. Gender
      1. Repeatedly attempts to speak with ranchers, even Lenny (86-91)
      2. View her only as form of temptation (32)
      3. Not worth the men’s trouble
   B. Relationship with Curley
      1. Forced to stay away from other men
         a. Stays in the house nearly all the time (77)
         b. Isolated from all men besides Curley
      2. Men refuse to talk to her (32, 77)
      3. Afraid interaction with Curley’s wife will lead to trouble with Curley
   C. Mother
      1. Would not let Curley’s wife join show (88)
      2. Stole letters from man in Hollywood (88)
      3. Prevented dream of becoming actress and forced to marry Curley

II. Crooks
   A. Race
      1. Not wanted in bunkhouse (68)
      2. Knows why father discouraged playing with white children (70)
      3. Recognizes his inferior position in society
   B. Self-doubts
      1. Expresses interest in joining Candy, George, and Lennie on new ranch (76)
      2. Proclaims to Candy, George, and Lennie to forget what he said (83)
      3. Realizes that the dream is unachievable
III. George
   A. Lack of wealth
      1. Has almost no money to his name (59)
      2. Prevents from achieving dream of owning his own land and forces to wander country looking for work
   B. Role as Lennie’s caretaker
      1. Although insincere, discusses the endless possibilities of life without Lennie (11)
      2. Reveals the amount of time and effort needed to care for Lennie
      3. Took Lennie in when Aunt Clara died (40)
      4. Only person that Lennie could turn to
   C. Lack of self-control
      1. Spends money in town at Susy’s place (52)
      2. Exhibits George’s insincere commitment to get his own land
      3. Bets on game of horseshoes (86)
      4. Displays sense of false hope
Unbreakable Constraints

_of Mice and Men_ contains several characters that encounter restrictions and limitations, whether they be because of the characters’ own self-faults or because of the unjust nature of life. Some of these characters, such as Curley’s wife, experience the effects of these restraints and limitations solely due to the way of society. However, most of the characters, like those of Crooks and George, are constrained by both the cruel nature of life and their own weaknesses. These characters, albeit some more than others, all make attempts to overcome the problems they face. Curley’s wife, Crooks, and George, in spite of their efforts, are unable to break the chains of their constraints and must face the consequences. In _Of Mice and Men_, John Steinbeck utilizes the characters of Curley’s wife, Crooks, and George to demonstrate the theme of the inequitable restrictions one faces and the attempts to overcome these restrictions in life.

The first time readers encounter Curley’s wife, they likely get the impression that she is simply an immoral and disloyal pleasure seeker; however, as the novel continues, readers come to realize that Curley’s wife is attempting to break free of her limits. The initial reason Curley’s wife is at a disadvantage is because of her role as a woman. The effect of her gender is demonstrated through her various attempts to speak with the ranchers, even the poor listener of Lennie (86-91). In response, the men of the ranch come to see her only as a “…piece of jail bait…” (32). The men’s opinion of Curley’s wife portrays that they simply view her as a form of temptation that is not worth their trouble. The second restriction Curley’s wife faces is her relationship with Curley. Forced to stay away from other men by her husband, Curley’s wife rhetorically asks, “…Think I like to stick in that house alla time?” (77). This example clearly
exhibits the isolation Curley’s wife experiences. In addition, the men repeatedly refuse to talk to Curley’s wife (32, 77). The ranchers are afraid that any interaction with Curley’s wife will lead to problems with Curley, further contributing to the loneliness his wife endures. The final restriction Curley’s wife had to endure was that of her mother. When she was just fifteen years of age, Curley’s wife was asked to join a travelling show and to move to Hollywood to act in the movies, both of which were made impossible by her mother (88). Curley’s wife’s dream of becoming an actress was prevented, and she was forced to marry Curley. Despite now being a grown woman independent of her mother, Curley’s wife still suffers from her mother’s inhibiting decisions. Much like Curley’s wife, the character of Crooks faces challenges that he is unable to prevent, but he is also constrained by limitations that he creates for himself.

Crooks, the African American stable buck on the ranch, serves as the prime example of a man nearly completely isolated from society because of the restrictions that plague him. The obvious reason behind Crooks’ isolation is his race. As an African American in the 1930s, Crooks enjoys few rights and little equality with the white ranchers. Crooks’ situation is perfectly described during his conversation with Lennie when Crooks claims that he “…ain’t wanted in the bunkhouse…” (68). During that same conversation, Crooks recounts how he played with the white kids when he was a child, much to his father’s dismay. Crooks never knew why his father was so upset by his playing with the white children, but he realizes now that it gave him a false sense of equality (70). These examples serve to reveal that Crooks recognizes his inferior position in life. The second major cause of Crooks’ isolation is the self-doubt that confines him. Based on his previous experiences, Crooks now seems fearful of taking chances in his disconsolate life. When Crooks first hears of the plans Lennie, George, and Candy have for owning their own ranch, he expresses immediate interest in joining them but later informs the
three men to disregard what he had said (76, 83). Instead of grasping on to something hopeful in life, Crooks believes that the dream the men have is unachievable and decides against the opportunity. George, the third character troubled by restrictions, oddly contains similarities to Crooks, one of them being that both are presented with challenges that are unable to be eliminated and issues that could ultimately be avoided.

George, the protagonist in *Of Mice and Men*, appropriately represents the most troubled character in the novel. The first challenge the reader becomes almost immediately aware of is George’s lack of wealth. For example, when asked how much money George and Lennie have saved, George replies, “‘We got ten bucks between us…’” (59). George’s lack of wealth causes him to never be able to accomplish, or even grasp on to the idea of owning his own land, and he is ultimately forced to wander the country looking for work. The second burden imposed on George is his role as Lennie’s caretaker. From the beginning of the novel, readers become aware of the difficulty of caring for Lennie. Despite being insincere about his comments, George lists the endless possibilities of life without his only friend (11). Through George’s words, readers learn of the amount of time and effort needed to care for Lennie. Readers also come to understand how George ended up travelling the country with Lennie. When discussing his situation with Slim, George mentions how he and Lennie grew up together and that when Lennie’s Aunt Clara passed away, “‘…Lennie just come along with me out workin’. Got kinda used to each other after a little while’” (40). The information George tells Slim explicitly reveals how George was compelled to become Lennie’s caretaker. The final constraint that George repeatedly comes face to face with is that of his own lack of self-control. When prompted by the other ranchers, George concedes to temptation and joins the others in town, spending the little money he has at a brothel (52). By this point, readers clearly determine the insincerity of
George’s commitment to acquire his own land. George’s lack of self-control is once again demonstrated through his betting on a game of horseshoes at the ranch (86). Readers are now able to absolutely grasp on to the fact that all the promises George has kept to Lennie throughout the novel have simply been George’s own display of false hope.

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck unveils the troubles deeply rooted in the characters of Curley’s wife, Crooks, and George due to the restrictions they face, whether these restrictions are inevitably unavoidable or ultimately preventable, and the attempts to withstand such challenges. Readers perceive the various effects of the restrictions that different human beings encounter, as well as the internal struggles that everyone experiences. However, the reader also is made aware of the courageous, optimistic attempts to overcome these disadvantages. Although the shackles of restriction are difficult to break and often lead to one’s downfall, the hope that arises from attempting to expunge these limitations reveals the true nature of humans to continue fighting, believing, and pushing through the difficult situations they come across in life. The decisions one makes in life in dealing with his or her own constraints can ultimately lead to his or her ruination; however, these choices and efforts can prompt new opportunities and chances otherwise thought of as unachievable.
Works Cited