

Polly Pupil

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Honors English 9

19 November 2014

Divided They Stand

In *Of Mice and Men*, author John Steinbeck uses the character of Crooks, the African-American stable buck, as an overt symbol of isolation to illustrate the larger point that a life without friendship corrodes one's soul. For example, Crooks is the only person of color on the ranch and, as a result, has been banished to a lowly room attached to the horses' stable (75). In doing this, the ranch owner has treated Crooks no better than an animal and physically denied him not only the physical comfort created by the stove in the bunkhouse where the other men sleep, but also the emotional warmth of human companionship (19). Cold nights in the barn and cold shoulders from his fellow workers have forced Crooks into a sad shell of self-protection where his only companions are books and a single-barreled shotgun. In addition, Crooks, described as a "proud, aloof man," bristles when Lennie, a rare friendly face among the white workers, comes for a visit (74). If Crooks would only open himself up to Lennie, he would see that not all men are harsh and judgmental. Unfortunately, Crooks is so damaged that he's unwilling to open himself to the opportunity of joining Lennie and his friends, George and Candy, on the dream farm. Furthermore, in a moment of weakness, Crooks admits to Lennie that a "guy needs somebody – to be near him...A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody" (80). When Crooks admits to having hallucinations when he's alone in the middle of the night, Steinbeck wants the reader to see the mental illness that segregation can cause. One of the worst punishments in prison is solitary confinement; in just this way, Crooks is a free man with no freedom because he is tortured by the harsh, inescapable reality of his life. Although many of the characters in this story are hurt by the toxic effects of loneliness, it is Crooks whose quest for friendship seems the most futile as Steinbeck shows that simple kindness and a bit of humanity are impossible in a world that seeks to divide rather than unify.