

Slim the Guardian Angel

One of the most famous endings in literature comes when George kills Lennie at the end of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. George's excruciating act of mercy is foreshadowed throughout the novella, and many point to Candy's regret over not shooting his own dog as the prime cause of George's decision to end Lennie's life himself. However, while Candy's experience with his dog certainly must have affected George, Slim plays a much larger role in George's decision to kill Lennie because Slim serves as the father figure that all these lonely ranch hands secretly want. These are men without families or wives, and they all want somebody to tell them what to do and how to live; Slim is this man, and he not only influences George to kill Lennie, but he also helps George give up on the dream that has kept him living in an unrealistic world. Furthermore, although it is difficult to read the novella as anything but sorrowful, understanding Slim's truly important role in *Of Mice and Men* does bring just a little light to the dark world of migrant workers in Depression America.

It is clear from the beginning of the book that George has his hands full and is in need of some kind of support. While the first page opens with a very peaceful description of a riverbank, the calming imagery of the "golden foothills," "willows fresh and green," and "twinkling" warm water contrasts with the frustration George feels when Lennie asks for ketchup with his beans: "'Well we ain't got any,' George exploded, 'Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy'" (11). George's frustration is natural—he is responsible for a mentally disabled

grown man—but the fact that he “explodes” suggests that he keeps things bottled up inside and that he has no healthy way to cope with his unique and challenging situation. At the end of his rant, “his anger left him suddenly. He looked across the fire at Lennie’s anguished face, and then he looked ashamedly at the flames” (11). George’s anger is manic in that it explodes and then leaves just as quickly; also, he himself knows that he has lost control, and his shame only adds to his burden. George and Lennie do patch things up after this conflict, but the first chapter ends on a note of unease. As the two men fall asleep, “the red light dimmed on the coals. Up the hill from the river a coyote yammered, and a dog answered from the other side of the stream” (16). The dimming light suggests that the future may not be so bright, and the contrast between the coyote and the dog parallels the contrast between nature and civilization; George and Lennie are heading back into the world of other people, and this is where trouble always occurs for them. While we see that George truly cares for Lennie, it is also clear that he struggles with his responsibility to him.

At the ranch, they meet the boss, but it is soon obvious that Slim is the “prince” of the ranch. People listen to him and look up to him, and he is the kind of supportive figure that these ranch hands need. Indeed, Slim has a warmth to him that is lacking in the “unpainted,” “latched,” “long, rectangular” bunkhouse in which all the ranch hands sleep. When George first meets Slim, Slim comments on how unusual it is for two men to travel around together: “I don’t know why. Maybe ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other” (35). Slim’s words have the tough veneer of a manly ranch hand, but he is really suggesting that the world is a needlessly cold place, that

men *should* travel around together. Furthermore, the other men look to Slim for approval and for advice, and “all men stopped when he spoke” (33). When Candy is trying to decide whether or not to let Carlson shoot his dog, he looks to Slim for the answer: “Candy looked a long time at Slim to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none” (47). The difference between Slim and Carlson is that Carlson badgers Candy to kill his dog whereas Slim makes his position clear without even saying a word. Slim's strength is his ability to lead without even talking. Additionally, Slim is the one who reminds Carlson to take a shovel, which means that he is thoughtful enough to ensure that the dog has a burial, and Slim is the only one in the bunkhouse who keeps his eye on Candy during the ordeal. Long after they hear the gunshot and Candy turns to face the wall, Slim is still watching the old man. In this sense, he serves as a father figure to Candy, helping him do the right thing, and keeping an eye on him to make sure he's okay. Slim has a deep understanding of human nature that the other ranch hands lack.

Slim also takes a special interest in George and Lennie, and he practically appoints himself as their guardian and advisor. Slim first protects Lennie after he fights with Curley. Knowing that Lennie and George will surely be kicked off the ranch if it's discovered that Lennie broke Curley's hand, Slim takes control of the situation by threatening Curley: “If you don't tell nobody what happened, we ain't going to. But you jus' tell an' try to get this guy canned and we'll tell ever'body, an' then will you get the laugh” (64). Slim knows exactly what will hurt Curley the most, and that is for other people to know that he was beaten in a fight. Again, he demonstrates his deep and

profound understanding of people. Maybe more importantly, it is Slim who plants the idea of killing Lennie in George's head; he is the most important influence on George's tragic decision. After Lennie kills Curley's wife, Slim and George talk alone, and Slim does most of the talking while George just nods. Twice, Slim says, "I guess we gotta get 'im" (97), and it is George who seems to argue against a solution that hasn't yet been spoken: "Couldn't we maybe bring him in an' they'll lock him up?" (97). But, Slim makes it clear that locking up Lennie is not an option: "S'pose they lock him up an' strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain't no good, George" (97). Although he never directly suggests that George kill Lennie, Slim clearly shows him that there is no other option. His simple claim that locking him up "ain't no good" is all it takes for George, who finally gives in when he says, "I know . . . I know" (97). At this point in the story, George knows what he has to do because Slim has made it clear that killing Lennie is the only choice.

Even the final lines of the story emphasize Slim's influence on George's past actions and on his future. In disbelief of what he has done, George can only whisper to the others, and he "looked steadily at his right hand that had held the gun" (107). Slim "twitches" George's elbow as if to bring him out of his trance and suggests that they get a drink, which reminds us of what all the other men do with their money at the end of the month. Although it's a sad end to the story, Slim brings George back to the real world, a world where ranch hands drink their money away and none of them buy a ranch. However, George now has Slim, who understands him profoundly, which is shown when he says, "You hadda George. I swear you hadda" (107). Here Slim is

speaking the same kind of truthful but comforting words that a wise father would give in a tough situation: George and Lennie's dream was not realistic. Although this is not a happy thing to realize—just as Candy had to realize it was time to put his dog down—the important thing is that everyone has someone by his side, and George has Slim.

Understanding Slim as the major cause of George's decision to kill Lennie changes how we read the story because this kind of interpretation suggests that even in the dark and lonely world of migrant workers there might be some light, even if it is in the form of a quiet friendship. Maybe, though, Slim represents something bigger than just a friend or a father figure: Steinbeck often describes Slim in terms that one might use to describe someone not of this world: his face is "ageless" and "his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought" (34). Slim is so different from the other ranch hands that he might even represent a diety of sorts. Perhaps Steinbeck is suggesting that the best hope for support and connection for an American migrant worker during the Great Depression could only come from above.

(1521 words)