

One powerful example of nature symbolism appears in the closing scene of the novel. Steinbeck describes the calm pool in the river just before Lennie arrives. It is rich with life, including a small water snake crossing to the shallows. The snake has "a periscope head" which is "twisted from side to side" (99); like all periscopes, it is a means of looking out for danger. Unbeknownst to it, the danger is above: a heron, standing motionless in the water, suddenly spears the snake and eats it. This scene fits neatly into Steinbeck's overarching nature imagery. In nature, there is a balance of life and death, and with the snake's death, the life of the heron is sustained, and all living things must some day die to keep the cycle going. But the scene also has symbolic value on other levels. For one, it represents the abstract idea that we cannot escape death no matter how circumspect nor cautious we are. From this perspective, the snake specifically represents Lennie, who -- like the snake -- doesn't know that his fate is already sealed. It can also represent the dream of the little farm that George and Lennie share. Crooks, the stable buck, had commented that they would never get the farm; he'd "seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none in their hand." (76) He was right: the dream died when Lennie killed Curley's wife, long before he fled to the pool. Likewise, the snake was doomed well before the heron killed it. Fate -- like the heron -- is always waiting to ruin the best laid plans of men who want to get a little place of their own. This scene is one example of how rich symbolism adds depth and meaning to the story.