

## STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE IN JOHN STEINBECK'S OF MICE AND MEN

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### Abstract

Steinbeck was not an untalented author and many of his most notable skills are on display in *Of Mice and Men*. The speech in the book, if now dated, catches the idiosyncrasies of regional dialect with great accuracy and flavor further, if Steinbeck was not a stylist of the first rank, he had a good reporters sense for the selective use of detail. But even by Steinbeck's own modest standards, *Of Mice and Men* are melodramatic and contrived. . Such an act is not surely innocent of intention, and Steinbeck's self-defense was an admission of the extent to which he had warped a real story to fit his personal philosophy and to manipulate complaint and unquestioning readers. On the ranch with other men, George plays the part of a guy just bucking barley all his life. With all this acting throughout the novel, George conceals himself from the other characters and from the reader.

Curley is a little guy trying to act big and tough. This is why he immediately picks on big Lennie. It is safe for Curley to act cocky since he is the boss's son, allowing him to be protected in his performance as a tough guy. The characters in *Of Mice and Men* are encouraged to perform and are pushed further into their various roles by forces outside of themselves. The novel is a critique of the plight of a certain stratum of that society- the landless, poor, agricultural workers- and in the figures of George and Lennie, Steinbeck tries to dramatize on an individual level the tragic story of an entire class of people. Even the dramatic climax of the story must be interpreted with an eye toward the social.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. He attended Stanford University without graduating, and though he lived briefly in New York, he remained a lifelong Californian, Steinbeck began writing novels in 1929, but he garnered little commercial or critical success until the publication of *Tortilla Flat* in 1935. Steinbeck frequently used his fiction to delve into the lives of society's most downtrodden citizen. A trio of novels in the late 1930s focused on the lives of migrant workers in California. In *Dubious Battle*, published in 1936, was followed by *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, and in 1939, Steinbeck's masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Still, Steinbeck was not an untalented author, and many of his most notable skills are on display in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck was not an untalented author, and many of his most notable skills are on display in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck frequently said that his initial intention with the book was to tell it solely, or almost solely, through dialogue, forming it up in the manner of a play. In this he said that it was a "failure." After trying to write the book just through its characters speech, he added its narrative parts. Both the dialogue and the narrative of the book are impressive.

Although very much a product of the upper class, Steinbeck had worked on a ranch and he had a good ear. The speech in the book, if now dated, catches the idiosyncrasies of regional dialect with great accuracy and flavor further, if Steinbeck was not a stylist of the first rank, he had a good reporters sense for the selective use of detail. At his best- as in the opening chapters of *East of Eden*- his ability to describe the land and the countryside he grew up in can be touched with a deep and intimate feeling of beauty.

But even by Steinbeck's own modest standards, *Of Mice and Men* are melodramatic and contrived. In defending the book, Steinbeck told reporters that the character of Lennie was based on an actual dimwitted farmhand he had known who killed a foreman who had fired a friend of his. Such an act is not surely innocent of intention, and Steinbeck's self-defense was an admission of the extent to which he had warped a real story to fit his personal philosophy and to manipulate complaint and unquestioning readers.

Moreover, none of the book's scenes is anything but contrived. Each is one of rising conflict, and at the center of this struggle is the unnamed woman. Here is how she is introduced.

She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up.  
Her fingernails were red. Her hair was in little rolled clusters,  
Like sausages. She wore a cotton house dress and red mules, on the  
Insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers. "I'm  
Looking for Curley," she said her  
Voice had a nasal, brittle.

She is not, however, looking for Curley, her husband, but rather that manly workman Slim, and, as Slim rightly avoids her, she spends most of the book popping in and out, coming on to all the other workmen. By implication we are led to believe that her husband, born into modest wealth, may be impotent. It is the simplest left-wing cliché: the poor men are the real men and sexually potent, and women married into a higher station are most often bad, empty-headed, promiscuous, and full of desire for these true sons of the earth.

George also takes a part in the play within a play. Even in front of his traveling companion, George performs acts as if Lennie is a burden: "When I think of the swell time I could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace". But it is clear throughout the novel that George needs and wants Lennie's company. On the ranch with other men, George plays the part of a guy just bucking barley all his life. "Don't tell anybody about it." Just go on like we was go on buck barley the rest of our lives". His true intentions, however, are embedded in conversions about saving up to get land of his own. George also lies about why they left the past job and about Lennie being his cousin. With all this acting throughout the novel, George conceals himself from the other characters and from the reader.

In addition to George and Lennie, the supporting cast plays roles and act parts. Curley is a little guy trying to act big and tough. This is why he immediately picks on big Lennie. It is safe for Curley to act cocky since he is the boss's son, allowing him to be protected in his performance as a tough guy.

The characters ability to change roles and alter performances suggests that what Henry Sayre calls "outside" forces are crucial in any performance. Because the "outside" affects performance and because the characters are acting roles, their audience, in this case others on the ranch, becomes an integral part of the performance. For instance, when Carlson suggests Candy's dog needs to be shot, "Candy looked for help from face to face". Like an actor scanning to make eye contact in a play, Candy consults the outside forces, which help shape his response. The importance of the audience is also underscored in Charlotte Hadella's discussion of George's varying responses to questions about his relationship with Lennie. The ranch boss and Slim hear very different stories. "George is the speaker in both cases, but because the listeners differ, the subject changes shape or form and appears to control the speaker". The characters in *Of Mice and Men* are encouraged to perform and are pushed further into their various roles by forces outside of themselves.

Against the exposition of the itinerant laborer's lonely life of moving and working, Steinbeck counter poses the dream that George and Lennie share. As mentioned above, it is not just any dream, or even simply the dream of a better life. In the opening chapter, when repeats the story for Lennie he begins not by talking about their own individual plans but rather about the state of many men like them. He says: "Guys like us that work on ranches are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place.

They come to a ranch an work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're pounding their tail on to some other ranch They aren't got nothing to look ahead to." This is the kind of life that George and Lennie dream of leaving, and, as George suggests, the hardships of that life have primarily to do with solitude and with not having a stable place or enough money to maintain oneself. But George and Lennie have other plans for themselves. A few moments later:

Lennie broke in. "But not us! And why?  
Because... because I got you to look after me,  
And you got me to look after you, and that's  
Why." He laughed delightedly. Go on now, George!"...  
O.K. Someday-we're go on get the jack together and we're go on have a little.  
And live off the fatta the land, Lennie shouted.

George then goes on to describe their modest farm, the security and freedom of having their own piece of land, and the way they will be able to work for themselves instead of for an occasional wage. A reading of these particular desires and ambitious which George and Lennie cling to, and of the particular things they want to overcome, suggests that Steinbeck rather than writing a story about "dreaming" or "hoping" in general is instead making a very precise and pointed critique of certain aspects of what it is like for many people to live in California, and, by extension, American society. More specifically, *Of Mice and Men* is a critique of the plight of a certain stratum of that society- the landless, poor, agricultural workers- and in the figures of George and Lennie, Steinbeck tries to dramatize on an individual level the tragic story of an entire class of people.

It is worth noting that in the story George and Lennie's dream is by no means unique to them, for it proves also to be the dream of every ranch hand to whom they tell it; Candy and Crooks, for example, each ask if they can join in on the plan.

Candy, of course, is accepted; while Crooks seems to have second thoughts (Steinbeck also devotes a large part of one chapter to the figure of Crooks, and to a critical exposition of racism in rural California). The characters in *Of Mice and Men* then can be seen as archetypal insofar as their story is meant to be understood as emblematic of a larger, nonfictional story.

They represent the people who work on the farms and in the factories but do not own any part of them, people who earn a wage and have little or nothing more. And in constructing the novella this way Steinbeck wants to draw the reader's attention to what he sees as certain urgent and widespread social problems. This sort of direct engagement with social concerns is typical of fiction within the social Realist tradition.

Even the dramatic climax of the story must be interpreted with an eye toward the social. Curley's wife is the catalyst for Lennie's tragic end, and through most of the story she appears as a purely menacing figure—an ominous portent, one might say. But as she recounts her personal history to Lennie the reader realizes that she, too, must be understood within the context of her surroundings. We see that insofar as she is constrained by unjust social norms, she is not unlike the figures of George and Lennie and Crooks.

In her life she is trapped first by her mother's tyranny and the claustrophobia of small town Salinas (Steinbeck's own hometown), and then by and her catastrophic role in the story are thus understood not simply as willful destructiveness and licentiousness, or even as the workings of an abstract "tragic fate." Her role is more concrete and complex: her actions and the events resulting from them are likewise the negative upshot of the specific norms and practices which govern society and contemporary life (in her case, the normative models of family and marriage). The novella's ending, then, further develops and indeed emphasizes Steinbeck's analysis of the ways social conventions and practices can have detrimental effects on the lives of people within that society.

Steinbeck's debt to and lineage from Social Realist and Naturalist fiction, then, is made clear through a reading of the way he constantly places his characters and narrative within the context of very specific and, more importantly, actual social situations. The narrative of "Of Mice and Men" from George and Lennie's hopeful dreaming to the calamitous end to those dreams—is founded upon a rigorous analysis and critique of the encompassing structures of social organization and the ways they affect the people who must live within them.

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