

The Creative Launcher

URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on 30th December, 2021

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Theme of Alienation in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.15>

Pages: 124-129

Abstract

Of Mice and Men (1937) is a novella written by Steinbeck. He has expressed his strong concern for the impoverished and disadvantaged, particularly migrant labourers. He depicts believable individuals in this work to show a glorious past. He has been acquainted with the poor, notably migrant agricultural laborers, both American and Mexican, since arriving in California in the 1930s, and has written from their perspective. His main purpose is to provide a genuine portrait of these people. One of Steinbeck's most recurring themes is loneliness. Every character in *Of Mice and Men*, for example, is dealing with loneliness and isolation in some way; the two main characters, George and Lennie, have no families, no social circle, and no background to speak of. They've displaced ranch employees who appear out of nowhere at the start of the tale, with nowhere else to turn but each other. They currently constitute a single entity, each

complementing the other. But Lennie is physically strong but intellectually frail, George is mentally strong but physically frail; Lennie is a spendthrift, whereas George is a saver. Lennie has no notion what the ramifications of his actions will be; he acts on instinct. George, on the other hand, is always trying to restrict him and giving him advice on the dos and don'ts of social interaction. Even this George and Lennie team is shattered by the novel's conclusion when George is compelled to murder Lennie to spare him from a far more terrible death. George's loneliness and isolation must be palpable now that Lennie isn't at his side to keep him company and make him feel alive.

Keywords: Isolation, Loneliness, Ramification, Realistic, Mental Trauma, Social Interaction

Of Mice and Men is a famous and lengthiest work by Steinbeck that chronicles the story of George and his mentally disabled lifelong buddy Lennie. Lennie Small, according to Beach's book, is "probably the purest expression of the writer's life-long pity for the downtrodden ordinary man." *Of Mice and Men* is situated in the Salinas Valley, California, as are many of his other writings. "The novella is a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world" (*Of Mice and Men* 1). However, unlike his other writings, *Of Mice and Men* is not a political statement. The opening scene of *Of Mice and Men* opens with a wonderful basis for friendship between George and Lennie, with a sense of peace and beauty of the pool. In this line, Steinbeck refers to the peaceful lake in the Salinas River Valley as "the golden foothill slopes". "A few miles south of Soledad California. The time is sunset, Thursday, George and Lennie appear. George is small and quick, dark of face with restless eyes and sharp strong features. Lennie trail behind, shapeless, a huge gangling puppet, George opposite (*John Steinbeck's Revisions of America*, 185). A few rabbits arrive on the beach at the beginning of the tale. The river's beauty, with its pool, valley, and hills, is brilliantly described by Steinbeck as a location of peace, which is subsequently broken by the appearance of the two characters George and Lennie. Their words suggest that they are inexperienced and emotional workers. Through George's guidance to Lennie, Steinbeck establishes a strong bond between them and demonstrates how he looks after Lennie. George shouts at Lennie to throw away a dead mouse he discovers in his pocket. Future events expose Lennie's peculiar need. "I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time. An' that ain't the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out. His voice rose nearly to a shout... You keep me in hot water all the time" (13).

George informs Lennie that he has lost all of his jobs as a result of him and that he is always on the lookout for new ones in unusual places. Every time he does something wrong, he gets himself into trouble, and George is worried about getting him out of it. Despite George's complaints about Lennie, he bears a great deal of responsibility for him. By traveling to the town and associating with others, he hopes to live a happy, carefree life. He constantly reminds Lennie of key details to keep them safe, and George becomes bored of it.

This is a moving story about two migrant laborers attempting to make their way through the 1930s American drought and depression. George and Lennie are driven by a desire to one

day own some land of their own while being trapped in a world of grinding labor and little promise. Lennie, despite his size, suffers from a mental handicap that makes him act like a kid with limited comprehension of the world. As Lennie's protector and companion, George deftly balances both roles while keeping a thin link between Lennie's world and reality. "a theme genuinely rooted in American life, for its bite into the strict quality of its material, for his refusal to make his study of tragically loneliness and frustration either cheap or sensational and finally for its simple, intense and steadily rising effect on the stage" (*The Intricate Musics: A Biography of John Steinbeck*, 209).

As a self-described "watchdog" of society, Steinbeck set out to find and record the causes of human sorrow. Steinbeck seems to be suggesting that loneliness is more harmful than poverty. Steinbeck says that loneliness is responsible for much of the sorrow in this section. "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place ... With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us" (15).

Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife are among the other characters who have experienced loneliness and disappointment. The story says that humans are at their finest when they have someone to turn to for direction and protection. George tells Lennie that they are extraordinarily fortunate to have one other because most guys, especially those on the outskirts of society like George and Lennie, don't have this luxury. Because the bulk of the world does not understand or appreciate their link, it is made to appear extremely uncommon and valuable. Crooks, the old black stable hand, says these words to Lennie and expresses his loneliness. "I seen things out here. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I jus' don't know" (72).

In a world where racial inequality exists, black has no place. Crooks, the stableman, is not only poor and houseless like the other refugees, but he is also lonely. He was a lonely black stable buck, and because he was black, he wasn't treated as equally as the other farmworkers. No one slept in the same room with him, and they only communicated with him to instruct him what to do. The hue of his skin is causing his sentiments to be disturbed. Individuals of color were not regarded equally to people of lighter complexion. No one on the ranches looked was no one on ranches who looked like him. He was alone, with no one to talk to or assist him with his difficulties. With no one to talk to and no friends, he resorted to literature. They were his sole company, and they couldn't respond or assist him in any way. As a black man with a physical impairment, Crooks is forced to dwell on the edges of ranch life. He is not even permitted to visit the white men's bunkhouse or play cards with them. Crooks, who lives alone in a room off the barn, is miserable and lonely.

His hatred is usually expressed through his scathing, caustic sarcasm, but he shows a sad, heartbreaking tenderness in this line. Crook's longing for a companion parallels George's previous account of migratory laborer existence. Even though Lennie is a half-wit, he enviously

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Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

envies George's good fortune in sharing his life with him. Yet, deep inside, he longs for friendship, for someone with whom he can chat. As Crooks burst out that:

“Suppose you had to sit out here and read books. Sure you could play horse shoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody — be near him.” He whined, “a guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya”, ... I tell ya a guy gets too lonely and he gets sick”. (72)

They want to put money aside so that they may own their land and reap the benefits of their labor. Rabbits are Lennie's greatest joy since he enjoys petting soft animals. When George discovers a dead mouse in his pocket, he orders him to throw it away. George yells at Lennie again as he picks it up from where he flung it. George cautions him about the dangers of having such pets. George reminds him about the unfortunate incident on the other farm, when Lennie accidentally touched a girl's clothing, causing them to flee the town. “An' you ain't gonna do no bad things like you done in Weed, neither” (8). George gives the command. Lennie arrives at the same location as them and advises him to hide until George arrives to look for him in case something goes wrong at their new workplace.

They both arrived at their new workplace and were assigned to the bunkhouse. The property where George and Lennie come is comparable to the one where Steinbeck worked in California's Salinas Valley. The people, their jobs, and the setting are all based on Steinbeck's personal experiences working at the Spreckles Sugar Company. Curley, the boss's son, presents a problem for Lennie. He walks into the bunkhouse and summons him to battle. “Lennie didn't do nothing to him. What's he got against Lennie?” (27). Curley inquires as to whether or not both of them are newcomers to the bunkhouse. When George answers to Curley, he emphasizes the importance of Lennie responding when questioned. George warns Lennie to keep away from Curley, but he also assures him he doesn't have to say anything if Curley strikes him. George also reminds Lennie about the river, to which he must go if a crisis arises. “Never mind, never mind. I'll tell you when. I hate that kind of a guy. Look, Lennie, if you get in any kind of trouble, you remember what I told you to do?” (31) Curley's wife comes to meet George and Lennie in the bunkhouse. While Lennie compliments her beauty, George urges him to keep away from her as well. This concerns Lennie, who expresses his dissatisfaction with the location. “I don' like 83 this place, George. This ain't no good place. I wanna get outta here.” (34) .

This is a concept that Steinbeck emphasizes throughout the work. Everyone requires someone; no one was meant to be alone for an extended period. Curley's wife is an excellent illustration of a person in need. She was continuously going around asking folks questions. “Have you guys seen Curley?” (61). When they answered no, she tried to remain and strike up a discussion, but no one wanted to speak with her because she was the boss's son's wife. As a result, no one wanted to talk to Curley's wife, leaving her alone and without friends. As a result, she became enraged at everyone and tried to attract other people's attention by flirting with them, earning her a low-society moniker. Because of the social bias against women, she is feeble. She doesn't even have a name; she's constantly referred to as “Curly's wife”. Curly is

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her husband by accident. Their marriage isn't based on love at all. Curley has no regard for her. He is a cruel and overbearing spouse. She doesn't have a place in her family or society. The ranchers think she's a bit flirty. But she is never as 'evil' as others perceive her to be. She is an object to her because she is a threat, not because she is a tart. Her husband casts a pall over her. She wants someone to talk to and be taken dancing once in a while. When George labels her a knucklehead, she retaliates, "I got nobody to talk to. I got nobody to be with. Think I can just sit home and do nothing but cook for Curley? I want to see somebody. Just see them a talk to them" (49). Steinbeck depicts the societal prejudice and pain caused by loneliness in these lines. Candy, the old guy, and Crooks, the black stableman, are destined to suffer as a result of the social framework. Even George, who has a basic awareness of his surroundings but no way out, is doomed. He can no longer hold on to his dream of owning a piece of property and has given up hope.

Migrant farmers are in terrible condition. They couldn't stay in a location where they had a supervisor like Curley. They have to work for a short period and then move to another location if there is a problem. Everyone makes fun of Curley when he asks for his wife. He can't take it anymore and clashes with the smiling Lennie, punching him mercilessly. "Lennie looked helplessly at George, and then he got up and tried to retreat. Curley was balanced and poised. He slashed at Lennie with his left, and then smashed down his nose with a right. Lennie gave a cry of terror. Blood welled from his nose" (*The Wide World of John Steinbeck* 138-139). Lennie, unsure of what to do, is powerless when he encounters George. He refuses to fight back and even fails to defend himself. When George instructs him to fight back, he uses all of his might to break Curley's hand.

Candy, an ageing, retired ranch worker has no emotional anchor except his dog which is slain by another ranch worker. He is always concerned about his advancing years when he will be unable to care for himself without the assistance of others. Curly, the boss's son, is the most nefarious of all the characters, and he, too, is an outcast, feared and booed by all. Because of his inferiority mindset, which drives his jealousy, he is unable to bond with his wife. His wife, who appears vivacious and flirting on the surface, is an exceedingly lonely lady on the inside because she cannot find company from her husband on the one hand, and her goal of becoming a Hollywood star has been destroyed on the other. Crook is another character who, because he is Black, is unable to integrate with any other character due to racial prejudice. The ranch's location, which is near to a place called Soledad, which means solitude in Spanish, emphasizes the novel's subject of isolation and loneliness.

Isolation, loneliness, and a sense of directionlessness are all products of society's economic system, at least in part. The ranch is owned by the firm, a nonhuman entity, and everyone else, including the boss, is an employee. Because everyone is responsible for the company's prosperity, they acquire a proclivity for passing the buck. Despite their seeming insignificance, the working class's ambitions are constantly out of reach due to the prevailing social environment, notably strained interpersonal ties. Along with a climate of suspicion and uncertainty that suffocates all human relationships. Because of this mistrust and lack of communication, Lennie was previously accused of attempted rape, and it is for this reason that

he kills Curly's wife. George, Lennie, and Candy's ambition of owning agricultural property and living a happy existence is shattered by this event.

The novel's central theme is the novel's failure to realize perfectly reasonable goals and desires of society's weaker members. Nobody can blame George for wanting to buy a piece of land so that he may assert his independence, and no one can blame Lennie for wanting to have rabbits on his agricultural farm so that he can touch them to satisfy his inclination for caressing soft items. There's nothing wrong with Candy's desire for a secure retirement, and there's nothing wrong with Crook's desire for a farm where he can be his boss and be treated with honour. It is these characters' social and economic limitations, as well as their susceptibility, that causes them to have seemingly genuine yet unimportant dreams. "His early novels were deliberate attempts to achieve art through the successful fusion of thought and craft. His successive works increasingly approached this achievement and *Of Mice and Men* immediately proceeded by *The Grapes of Wrath* and he comes closer to accomplishing the fusion of form and content, idea and technique that constitute literary art" (239).

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