Of Mice and Men

John Steinbeck

(Also wrote as Amnesia Glasscock and John Ernest Steinbeck) American novelist, playwright, screenwriter, poet, short story writer, and journalist.

The following entry presents commentary on Steinbeck's novel Of Mice and Men (1937) through 2007.

INTRODUCTION

Nobel Prize winner Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (1937) is a novella examining the friendship between two itinerant migrant workers who dream of operating their own farm amidst the privations of the Great Depression. The story of Lennie, a giant man with limited mental capacity, and his best friend George—his loyal caretaker who struggles with his own demons—the novel is considered a classic work of American fiction whose themes of friendship, pain, and sacrifice reflect Steinbeck's desire to expose to the American public the desperate lives of California's often destitute working classes in the 1930s. A short work of less than one hundred pages, Of Mice and Men remains a fixture in high school curricula because of its evocative portrait of the Great Depression, its progressive focus on social issues, and the sympathetic characterizations of George and Lennie. A best-seller, the novella has achieved equal fame in its cinematic and stage adaptations.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Steinbeck was born on 27 February, 1902 in Salinas, California, a setting that would influence much of his later literary output. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck—after whom he was named—was the Monterey County treasurer, while his mother was a school teacher. During Steinbeck's childhood, Salinas was a sparsely populated frontier community whose economy was largely dependent upon farming and ranching. As a result, Steinbeck was able to spend several summers working at area ranches and mingling with the migrant workers who would pass through—interactions which afforded him a firsthand perspective of the sorts of figures that populate the Salinas-set Of Mice and Men. After his graduation from Salinas High School, he enrolled at Stanford University but only attended classes intermittently and supported himself as a farm laborer and lab assistant before he finally fully dropped out in 1925. He bought an extended passage to New York City by way of a freighter that traveled through the Panama Canal. After arriving in New York he worked various odd jobs, eventually landing a position at The New York American, though his tenure there was brief and he struggled to sell his fiction in the interim. Finding little initial success as a writer, he left New York, eventually returning to California in 1928 and finding employment as a tour guide and a fish hatchery caretaker in Tahoe City. There he met Carol Henning, who was vacationing in Lake Tahoe, and the couple married in 1930. His father wished to support his son's ambitions and provided the couple with a house near Monterey, as well as a small stipend that enabled him to write full-time. The result of this period was Steinbeck's first novel, Cup of Gold: A Life of Henry Morgan (1929), a historical romance about the notorious seventeenth-century pirate which was published without fanfare and did little to change his fortunes. Nonetheless, he continued to write and his next work, a collection of linked short stories titled The Pastures of Heaven (1932), demonstrated his talent for setting and characterization. While his next novel, To a God Unknown (1933), also proved to be a disappointment, his literary fortunes changed dramatically with the release of Tortilla Flat (1935), the story of working-class Mexican Americans in Monterey. The book proved to be a huge success, both establishing Steinbeck's literary reputation and providing him with a financial windfall that enabled him and his wife to leave their life of near-poverty behind. In 1940 the couple took a lengthy biological tour of the Gulf of California that would become the basis for his famous nonfiction account of that trip, Sea of Cortez (1941). Their marriage increasingly strained, Steinbeck and his wife divorced in 1942. He married a second time, to Gwyndolyn Conger, in 1942, with whom he later had two sons.
Steinbeck’s rising literary reputation coincided with the worsening of the Great Depression that had begun in 1929. California served as a center for the influx of destitute workers and Steinbeck effectively captured their desperation with a series of socially progressive novels for which he is perhaps most famous, including *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* (revised edition published 1941; won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), and *Cannery Row* (new edition 1947). Having lived and grown up among the sorts of workers with which he populated his novels, Steinbeck was highly sympathetic to the plight of the working class, even joining the League of American Writers in 1935, a leftist group with communist leanings. These sympathies would prove problematic during the period of the House Un-American Activities Trials in the 1950s; though Steinbeck was never called to testify, many of his friends were. After Steinbeck’s death, his son reported episodes of government harassment during this era. His interest in highlighting the difficulties of the poor in California led him back to journalism, and he composed a series of articles for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the late 1930s.

Finding increasing traction as a journalist, when the United States became involved in World War II Steinbeck served as a war correspondent in Europe and North Africa until an injury forced his return to American soil in 1944. He collected his dispatches into several works, including *Bombs away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (1942) and *Once There Was a War* (1958), while also finding inspiration for a World War II novel about the Norwegian resistance titled *The Moon Is Down* (1942). In the late 1940s, he returned to his work as a foreign correspondent, creating dispatches from Russia that were later collected in *A Russian Journal* (1948). While his reputation remained strong—indeed, he was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1948—his marriage to his second wife was failing due in part to his long absences. After his divorce was finalized in 1948, he married for a third time in 1950, to Elaine Scott, a stage manager. During this period Steinbeck experimented with stage adaptations and screenplays of his various works, writing the 1939 New York Drama Critics Circle Academy Award-winning theater version for *Of Mice and Men*, as well as the screenplays for the well-received film versions of his own *The Pearl* (1948) and *The Red Pony* (1949), and the 1944 movie *Lifeboat*, for which he earned an Academy Award nomination. The last decade of his life marked a noticeable decline in both the quality and frequency of works, although his *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and the gentle travelogue *Travels with Charley* (1962) are generally considered standouts from this period. His writing career culminated with his being presented with the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. He did one last tour as a foreign war correspondent for *Newsday* in the 1960s, reporting on the Vietnam conflict in which his younger son, John Steinbeck IV, was serving a tour of duty. A lifelong heavy smoker, he passed away on 20 December, 1968 from congestive heart failure. His remains were entombed in his family’s plot in Salinas, where the city’s public library is now named in his honor.

**PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS**

*Of Mice and Men* is a character study of the figures of George Milton and Lennie Small, two bindlestiffs (drifters) who survive by working a series of difficult temporary jobs on ranches and farms in the Salinas Valley of Depression-era California. George and Lennie are childhood friends, with George serving as the slow-witted Lennie’s caretaker. Lennie is an enormous man, strong but gentle, prone to unintentionally causing problems due to a fixation with touching things he deems soft or pretty—a habit that inevitably proves problematic because of his inability to understand his own strength. Indeed, when the story opens, it quickly becomes apparent that the pair are in the midst of leaving their previous jobs as a result of an incident in which Lennie was accused of rape when he attempted to feel the red skirt of a young woman. When the reader is introduced to him, he carries the body of a mouse that he accidentally killed by stroking it too hard. George and Lennie find work at a ranch near Soledad, where they quickly encounter Curley, the diminutive and angry son of their new boss. Intimidated by Lennie’s size, he immediately targets the pair with his vitriol, while his bitter and flirtatious wife’s idle advances both confuse and interest Lennie. The pair is sustained by their shared dream of saving enough money to buy a small farm which they will work together. George regularly recites the story about their future farm, with Lennie filling in the same details each time—an indication that this is something the pair has been thinking about for a long time. The dream has constantly been deferred because of George’s tendency to waste his share of the farm down payment on alcohol and prostitutes, as well as because of Lennie’s inability to stay out of trouble. However, the dream suddenly seems attainable when another ranch hand named
Candy, an elderly man who is missing a hand, asks if he can pitch in with them by contributing half of the down payment necessary to buy the farm. With a specific farm in mind (the owners are highly motivated to sell, as the wife needs an operation), George begins to believe that they can settle down at last. However, Curley continues to harass Lennie—leading to a confrontation in which George encourages his friend to finally defend himself—while Curley’s wife (whose name is never revealed) makes a series of flirtatious advances on several ranch hands, including Lennie. Despite this, George remains convinced that the fulfillment of their long-standing dream is at hand and in his joy and confidence leaves Lennie by himself while he goes to town with the other workers—something he rarely does. Left alone, Lennie accidentally kills a puppy given to him by Slim (the sympathetic de facto boss of the ranch workers), before encountering the lonely figure of Curley’s wife. She confides to Lennie her dashed dreams of movie stardom and her extreme isolation and unhappiness on the ranch. Upon learning of Lennie’s love for soft things, she flirtatiously allows him to stroke her hair, but becomes frightened at his excessive strength and begins to scream. A panicked Lennie accidentally breaks her neck and flees the ranch, running to the spot where George told him to hide if things ever went wrong. When George returns from town, he learns of Curley’s wife’s death, Lennie’s culpability, and Curley’s intention to form a lynch mob to hunt down and kill Lennie. George heads to the river bank where he told Lennie to hide, hoping to find him before the mob can. Knowing that he cannot protect Lennie, George invokes the image of their shared dream one more time, telling Lennie to close his eyes and think of their farm. While Lennie recites his part of the story, George shoots him in the back of the head just as the lynch mob closes in on their secret location. Only Slim understands George’s loving motivation and gently escorts him away from the scene, while Curley and his cohorts watch them depart in confusion.

MAJOR THEMES

An experimental novel for Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men was intended as a work that, while steeped in his characteristic socially progressive musings about acceptance and personal responsibility, was meant to lend itself to easy adaptations for the stage and screen. The book is notable for its descriptive prose, detailed attention to setting, and focus on a small number of characters. Steinbeck had been considering transitioning into more drama and script writing and considered the shorter novella form of Of Mice and Men an ideal vehicle for doing so. As with most of Steinbeck’s novels from this period, the story is largely centered on the poor and working classes of California. Like the Hispanic characters that populate Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men features a series of underexposed social groups, for example the mentally handicapped Lennie and the bitter and fatigued African American laborer Crooks. Forced into an outsider role as the only black member of the staff (a status that compels him to live in isolation from the other workers), Crooks offers a candid—if disdainful—appraisal of Lennie and George’s futile dream, simultaneously noting the improbability and the appeal of their farming ambitions. While dismissing their dream as the same as that of virtually every other farmhand he has ever encountered, he nonetheless hopefully asks if he may be a part of their operation. Indeed, Crooks’s commentary about the immutable nature of life, fate, and the yearnings of mankind is one of the major thematic statements of the book. The novella’s title is borrowed from the second-to-last stanza of Robert Burns’s poem “To a Mouse,” which reads: “But little Mouse, you are not alone, / In proving foresight may be vain: / The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew, / And leave us nothing but grief and pain, / For promised joy!”

Steinbeck presents the relationship of Lennie and George as evidence of mankind’s desires and the ironic roles that fate and personal design play in them. Their ostensible dream is reflected in the often-repeated story about what their farm will consist of—one that takes on almost religious significance for the two men and can be seen as an allusion to the American Dream. However, their dream is inherently futile, largely because of the individual failings of each man: George is corruptible—prone to gambling, whoring, and drinking—while Lennie is an incomplete man, strong, but lacking in his mental capacity. Despite this, together they offer balance to one another, and either man would be lost without the other. Without the responsibility of looking after Lennie, George would likely become a casualty to his vices; Lennie would have been jailed or killed long ago without George’s guidance. Samuel I. Bellman suggests that together, the two men offer a complete psyche, one in which “George and Lennie are to each other as ego is to id in the same mind: the conscious, reality-sensitive regulator always having to keep in check the primitive, violent instincts.” The dream of the farm exposes their failures and strengths as a
tandem. The farm, ironically, was initially Lennie’s idea, but it’s a goal that George has wholly bought into, primarily because of Lennie’s continuing and unshakable belief in its attainability. While Lennie is the creator and sustainer of the dream, it is up to George to realize it. But George could not do so without Lennie, not only because of his need for Lennie’s income and physical assistance, but due to his own lack of focus. The dream offers a real and seemingly justifiable foundation for a mutual future, enabling them to endure the relentless misery of their current existences. And yet, as Steinbeck’s story indicates, their repeated individual failures—George’s inevitable succumbing to his base desires and Lennie’s fundamental inability to fit into society—constantly undercut each other’s hopes. Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* thus seems to be an exposition of the opposing forces of control and freedom that are constantly at war throughout life.

**CRITICAL RECEPTION**

*Of Mice and Men* was highly anticipated at the time of its release. Steinbeck was aware of this pressure and tried to defuse it, telling his publishers “I wish I could be personally elated about all this fuss but I can’t. The book isn’t that good.” He later repeated this sentiment in an article for *Stage* just before *Of Mice and Men*’s Broadway premiere, noting that the novel “was an experiment and, in what it set out to do, it was a failure.” Despite his personal concerns about the work, it was immediately well-received by critics and the general public alike, becoming a Book-of-the-Month selection and one of Steinbeck’s most financially successful and enduring novels. In his 1937 essay for the *North American Review*, Edmund C. Richards called *Of Mice and Men* “a masculine” work that is “the most profoundly moving story [Steinbeck] has so far told. This is a work of art so nearly perfect that it is a work of supererogation to heap up adjectives about it.” Later adaptations to the stage and screen also proved to be popular, making it one of a handful of works to see highly successful transitions to all three formats. Steinbeck likely had such adaptability in mind from the moment of the novel’s inception. Louis Owens notes that the work “was written to be simultaneously a readable play and a stageable novel, an experiment that Steinbeck himself described as ‘a tricky little thing designed to teach me to write for the theater.’” As such, it was the first of a set of three so-called “play-novellas” (the others being *The Moon Is Down* and *Burning Bright* (1950)), works that Peter L. Hays describes as experimental pieces that “consisted of description, dialogue, and action—no extensive history of a locale or interior monologue—thus the story itself could be played, being lifted from the book, the description guiding the set designer, the dialogue spoken, the action portrayed.” Steinbeck himself affirmed this intent, writing in *America and Americans* (1969) that the broader goal for *Of Mice and Men* was to create “a novel that could be played from the lines, or a play that could be read.”

Elizabeth McMurray has noted that “Rarely does anyone in *Of Mice and Men* present his or her true self. Along with Curley’s wife, the actions of Lennie, George, Curley, Crooks, Candy, and even the lighting itself consistently remind readers that this is, indeed, a play within a play. Steinbeck creates a world where people are prevented from being their true selves, and in the rare instances when they reveal a more authentic self, they face negative consequences.” This focus upon the ironic implications of fate is also one of the fundamental underlying narrative loct of *Of Mice and Men*. Laurence W. Mazzeno, for instance, has argued that “Steinbeck dramatizes the plight of men whose plans are destroyed by forces beyond their control. Hence, the novel shares several affinities with both classical and modern tragedies. In its cosmic irony it is akin to the works of nineteenth-century American naturalists, such as Frank Norris, and to the novels of British writer Thomas Hardy.” Richard E. Hart agrees, writing in a study of Steinbeck’s early fiction—including *Of Mice and Men*—that the author subscribed to a modified form of literary naturalism in which natural forces may push a person into making a choice, an adaptation that Hart labels ‘soft determinism’: “George, is cast as the thinker, the decision maker, the caretaker of Lennie, and, I would argue, the ultimately free, moral agent who vividly illustrates the two aspects of Steinbeck’s naturalism.” This intrinsic contrast between the figures of George and Lennie is one of the primary strengths of the novel, offering both a thematic center to the work and a compelling story of an unlikely friendship that promotes Steinbeck’s social progress agenda while adding a dramatic layer of narrative pathos. Through such devices, Mazzeno suggests, Steinbeck sought to orient his readers “to see that humans cannot be isolated from others, nor can they ignore the plight of the less fortunate.” Steinbeck’s ultimate focus upon the societal failures that allow the sorts of privation he saw in California during the Great Depression was a recurring theme of his fiction. Joan Steele describes him as “a moralist because he uses the novelist’s tools to describe elements of his
Like so many of his novels, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is fundamentally about man’s core search for happiness and the American Dream. Charlotte CookHadella notes that “a central metaphor in Steinbeck’s work is that of America as an imperfect New World, a Garden of Eden.” John L. Marsden calls Steinbeck’s vision “the quintessential ‘American Dream,’ a dream founded, of course, on the notion that on the frontier anyone can find success. The dream reveals as much about the nature of power relations in an industrial system as it does about the simple desire for material success.” But for George, the achievement of his dream of a farm is more than just owning a plot of land—it is equally about the attainment of a peaceful future with Lennie. Bellman argues that “George was a ‘whole’ person only so long as he was tied up to Lennie, looking out for him, denying himself all the pleasures of the senses so he could save his money and they could buy a place of their own. It was the unusual buddyship of the two, the story makes clear, that rendered possible a glorious dream of self-improvement, a constructive hope to live by.” Steele concurs, arguing that although “George is a father-figure to Lennie and has a position of authority, he often complains that if it were not for Lennie he could be free to sojourn in ‘cat houses’ and drink quantities of rotgut booze. Yet George does not really want this kind of freedom. He prefers the dream that he and Lennie share, and he would never attain that dream without Lennie. Paradoxically, he cannot attain the dream with Lennie either, for Lennie’s mentality makes the conscious striving for any goal impossible. But Lennie keeps the dream alive for George.” The depiction of their relationship has sometimes been described as descending to the level of mawkishness and sentimentality. Among those criticizing the maudlin nature of the friendship was Antioch Review critic Freeman Champney, who derided *Of Mice and Men* as “little else besides a variation on the theme ‘every man kills the thing he loves.’” The charge of misogyny has also been levelled at the novella, with the sole female character, Curley’s wife, presented as a shrew who never even merits the honor of a proper name. Lesley Broder has noted the further implications of Steinbeck’s negative portrayal of the sole representative of femininity, writing that, “Curley’s wife is often compared to Eve: unintentionally, her actions bring about the fall of paradise, or in this case, the dream of paradise.” Lennie, too, is regarded as a mixed figure, one who elicits both empathy and mild revulsion from the reader. While Lennie’s portrayal is largely sympathetic, Frederick J. Hoffman objects to his presence on a narrative level, arguing that “there is no attempt to make us realize [his] idiocy in the perspective of a larger fictional strategy; instead we are reduced to a comparable subrational level of appreciation and sympathy,” thereby reducing him to merely a pitiable figure rather than a source of narrative advancement. For his part, Steinbeck sought to establish Lennie as a sort of everyman; he “was to be, not a pathetic cretin, but a symbolic figure with earth longings, a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all, but the inarticulate and powerful yearnings of all men.”

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**PRINCIPAL WORKS**

**Novels**

*Cup of Gold: A Life of Henry Morgan* (novel) 1929
*To a God Unknown* (novel) 1933
*Tortilla Flat* (novel) 1935
*In Dubious Battle* (novel) 1936
*Of Mice and Men* (novel) 1937
*The Grapes of Wrath* [revised edition] (novel) 1941
*The Forgotten Village* (novel) 1942
*The Moon Is Down* (novel) 1942
*Cannery Row* [new edition, 1975] (novel) 1947
*The Pearl* (novel) 1947
*The Wayward Bus* (novel) 1947
*Burning Bright: A Play in Story Form* (novel) 1950
*East of Eden* (novel) 1952
*Sweet Thursday* (novel) 1954
*The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (novel) 1957
*The Winter of Our Discontent* (novel) 1961
*The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights: From the Winchester Manuscripts of Thomas Malory and Other Sources* [adapted from Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*] (novel) 1976

**Short Stories**

*The Pastures of Heaven* (short stories) 1932
*Nothing So Monstrous* [originally published in *The Pastures of Heaven*; published with an epilogue] (short story) 1936
*Saint Katy the Virgin* [collected in *The Long Valley*] (short story) 1936
The Long Valley [republished as Thirteen Great Short Stories from the Long Valley, 1943 and Fourteen Great Short Stories from the Long Valley, 1947] (short stories) 1938
How Edith McGillicuddy Met R.L.S. (short stories) 1943
The Cripshooter (short stories) 1957

Plays

Of Mice and Men: A Play in Three Acts (play) 1937
The Moon Is Down: A Play in Two Parts (play) 1942
Burning Bright: A Play in Three Acts (play) 1950
Pipe Dream [adaptation of Sweet Thursday by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II] (play) 1956
Famous American Plays of the Nineteen Thirties [contributor; edited by Harold Clurman] (plays) 1980

Screenplays

Forgotten Village (screenplay) 1939
Lifeboat (screenplay) 1944
A Medal for Benny [with Jack Wagner; published in Best Film Plays—1945, edited by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols, 1946] (screenplay) 1945
The Pearl (screenplay) 1948
The Red Pony (screenplay) 1949
Viva Zapata! [abridged; published in Argosy; edited edition by Robert E. Morsberger, 1975] (screenplay) 1952

Collections

East of Eden and The Wayward Bus (novels) 1962
The Red Pony, Part I: The Gift, and The Pearl (novels) 1963
The Pearl and The Red Pony (novels) 1967
Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday (novels) 1971
To a God Unknown and Pearl (novels) 1971
John Steinbeck, 1902-1968 [includes Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men, and Cannery Row] (novels) 1977
The Short Novels of John Steinbeck [includes Tortilla Flat, The Red Pony, Of Mice and Men, The Moon is Down, Cannery Row, and The Pearl] (novels) 1981

Other Works

Their Blood Is Strong [articles from the San Francisco News] (nonfiction) 1938
A Letter to the Friends of Democracy (nonfiction) 1940
Bombs away: The Story of a Bomber Team (nonfiction) 1942
Vanderbilt Clinic [photographs by Victor Kappler] (pamphlet) 1947
A Russian Journal [photographs by Robert Capra] (nonfiction) 1948
Once There Was a War [articles from New York Herald Tribune; published with new introduction, 1958] (nonfiction) 1958
Travels with Charley: In Search of America (nonfiction) 1962
Letters to Alicia (letters) 1965
America and Americans (nonfiction) 1969
Steinbeck: A Life in Letters [edited by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallstein] (nonfiction) 1975
The Collected Poems of Amnesia Glasscock [as Amnesia Glasscock] (poetry) 1976
Letters to Elizabeth: A Selection of Letters from John Steinbeck to Elizabeth Otis [edited by Florian J. Shasky and Susan F. Kiggs] (letters) 1978
The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath (nonfiction) 1988

CRITICISM

Edmund C. Richards (essay date summer 1937)


[In the following essay, Richards reviews three of Steinbeck’s novels, calling Of Mice and Men his most moving.]

Until the appearance of Tortilla Flat, few people even in the world of letters had heard the name of John Steinbeck.¹ After reading this book no reader could doubt, without benefit of radio or reviewer, that a
new and original writer had appeared on the literary scene. If the story of the disarming Danny and Jesus Maria Corcoran and the celestial casuist, Pilon, leaves you without that unique exultation which only love or religion or literature imparts, you may walk in the way of the commandments, but you will never enter the kingdom of letters because you are an incurable barbarian.

Lesser saints must be canonized because the second best always calls for a sponsor. John Steinbeck’s books write their own credentials. *Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men* have made an enviable place for themselves among the few imaginative pieces of today. These books have life and they communicate life. Here are beauty and reality.

Every day a new magazine novelist “rises to the peak of some tremendous climax which has to do with button’s or a neighbor’s wedding.” His story is always made to measure, cut of the cloth of mediocrity and the most conspicuous talent displayed by these authors is a talent to flatter the spiritual and social order of laissez-faire. Creative writers go directly to life and not the editor’s desk for their materials. Steinbeck is in the tradition of the great creative writers because his books do not stem from other books but come immediately from a fresh assessment of life’s traditional values.

The nature of fiction is mercurial and its undersurface preoccupation is always with the springs of human conduct. In the hands of a competent craftsman a story lends itself with equal indifference to magic or mischief. In the eighteenth century a French or British reformer wrote a pamphlet. Today the most successful propaganda for a cause, an institution or a principle, comes clothed in fiction. It may be and frequently is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau.

Modern fiction, when it is a serious projection of the writer’s vision of human life and its goal, and not a vulgar formula to titillate the groundlings, is second only to religion in its stimulation of the emotions and the dropping of the pollen which leads to action. The integrity of art is inviolate, and therefore no serious novelist can lend himself or his work to propaganda. First and last, he is an artist, not a reformer or an agitator. On his detachment, as on a single wire, is suspended his only worth. He can subscribe to no orthodoxies. André Gide says:

> It is important to realize that the essential value of a work of art, the quality which will ensure its survival, never lies in a conformist adherence to a doctrine, be that doctrine the soundest and surest possible; but rather in formulating questions which forecast the future’s, and answers to questions that have not yet been formulated. . . . Art that submits to orthodoxy, to even the soundest doctrines, is lost—wrecked upon the shoals of conformism.

On the other hand he cannot turn aside from the social and spiritual movements of his time to write madrigals of love and a lady’s honor. Intellectually Steinbeck is in the thick of the movement of our day. His sympathies may be overwhelmingly for the new order now in the making, but his sympathies are never permitted to betray his art. He has an almost classic Greek compassion for the victims of life’s and fate’s injustice, but his pity is one thing, and his art is another.

Readers of the last two books, *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*, might erroneously infer that Steinbeck’s culture is negligible. On the contrary, he has gone deeply into philosophy as well as science. Culture, of course, could not make of Steinbeck nor of any man an artist; culture makes only amateurs. The writer of great fiction must bring certain high gifts, some natural, some acquired, to the creation of his story. Culture can never write, but it may round out a serious work of fiction. Steinbeck has not clogged his mind or his emotions.

Thirty years ago a man laid himself out to acquire culture as an end in itself. The culture of the day overlaid his mind like rust on the blade of an unused sword. He read much, thought little or to no purpose, and cuddled his refined emotions. Culture had jelled the Edwardian mind until the War came to smash the mold.

The twin deities, Culture and Respectability were the Victorian reaction to the loose living and ignorance of the Georges. Our New England obsession with morals and moralism derives from the same source. Both England and America begot in the likeness of these deities poets and painters and critics and novelists. Most of their works remain as examples of cultivated mediocrity. If we have to stand on Arnold’s choice, Culture or Anarchy, by all the gods let us take living anarchy to dead formalism.

One may never hope to put his finger on the whole secret of a great writer. That magic is his individual possession, his chrism, his sanctifying grace. Neither God nor nature offer explanations of their mysterious workings. But certain characteristics do fall within the compass of criticism, and certain qualities distinguish if they do not define the genius of Steinbeck.
He is primarily a masculine writer. That books may be more or less accurately characterized as masculine or feminine, is no Freudian overture of literary psychology, but a patent mark of current American writing. Writers of fiction particularly labor under this handicap because their work must conform to the ideologies imposed by the remunerative women's magazines. Only an economically independent writer or a genuine artist like Steinbeck dare see life whole or see it plain.

The cultivated mind in contemporary America is undoubtedly feminine, and there is an economic as well as psychological explanation for this phenomenon. The successful American man may and does pass through college, but in the mass he emerges with his traditional convictions and Tory limitations scarcely brushed by other ideologies. The American male who makes money and enjoys the fruits of money is profoundly suspicious of ideas. Scholarship as such does not even come within the compass of his consciousness. Since our fiction for the most part is written for and supported by women, a feminine aura hangs about the substance as well as the form of this fiction. In any liberal society the masculine mind must function freely if art and letters are to be pursued for their own sake.

If Steinbeck were just another competent and charming writer, his advent on the contemporary scene would hold no importance for any individual except the editor of a feminine journal. But he has proved himself an original and highly individualistic force. His books provoke the masculine mind because of his fearless grappling with ideas and human passions as well as sacred taboos. The dry rot of gentility has never touched him and neither sex nor a woman's honor nor romantic love loom large as a man's serious problems in his view. His very first novel, *Cup of Gold*, gave ample evidence of this masculinity of mind.

If you ask for an explicit definition of what is here meant by masculinity, it may perhaps best be described as that attitude of mind which refuses to limit its vision and insists always on seeing the whole thing. If you must believe in a cause, if you want the comfort of the eternal verities and to keep them unres-olved by the restless flux of the human mind, if you insist on your "right" and "wrong" as fixed and unalterable categories, you must not look at "the whole thing."

The novel of the California orchard strikers is the best proletarian novel written in our time by an American. Never for a moment in this book, *In Du-*
tanism, he is not without religion. His religion is built on a kind of mysticism which is not the less impressive because it is as naturalistic as his ethics. This mysticism, which his intrepid rationalism cannot strangle, comes to the surface definitely in To a God Unknown.

No two of his books fit into the same genre, so many-sided is his mind. This versatility is apt to perplex his readers. The man who likes Tortilla Flat may turn aside from In Dubious Battle. A superficial mind is certain to be offended by his preference for paupers and vagabonds and drifters and cowhands. Not only has his accurate ear caught and held their rich idiom, but his compassionate understanding has read their dream and their desire.

Steinbeck’s last book, Of Mice and Men, is the most profoundly moving story he has so far told. This is a work of art so nearly perfect that it is a work of supererogation to heap up adjectives about it. Of Mice and Men is the tale of Lennie and George, two drifting cowhands who are united by a great affection and a dream shared. Nothing could shatter the affection, but the dream comes to naught through the blundering ineptitude of Lennie’s hazy mind. The climax breaks with a force indescribable.

This book, like all of Steinbeck’s books, has no heroine. The woman is always the destructive force in the drama he unfolds. Here she is a painted and brainless hussy whose devastating fascination Lennie cannot withstand. It is not without significance that he should dare so radical an innovation, and it is an incontestable proof of his power as a writer that he can hold his readers while he flaunts their pet sentimentality. For only a great prose artist, an artist whose touch is unfailing for the right stop and the right tone, could carry off this daring affront to America’s pet piety—the sanctity of woman. But great art can disarm even its enemies, and Of Mice and Men is indeed great art. It is Steinbeck’s finest book and Steinbeck is one of America’s finest living writers.

It is inconceivable that any man interested in the future of American letters can fail to watch the harvest of this man’s genius. He is not unlike his own Pilon.

Pilon was a lover of beauty and a mystic. He raised his face into the sky and his soul arose out of him into the sun’s afterglow...a wistful and shining Pilon went up to the sea gulls where they bathed on sensitive wings in the evening. That Pilon was beautiful and his thoughts were unstained with selfishness and lust and his thoughts were good to know.

“Our Father is in the evening,” he thought. “These birds are flying across the forehead of the Father. Dear birds, dear sea gulls, how I love you all. Your slow wings stole my heart as the hand of a gentle master strokes the full stomach of a sleeping dog, as the hand of Christ stroked the heads of little children. Dear birds,” he thought, “fly to our Lady of Sweet Sorrows with my open heart.” And then he said the loveliest words he knew, “Ave Maria, gratia plena—”

This is as beautiful and perfect a piece of simple prose as any man could write in America today. On so rare an artist and on so fine a gift we ask the blessing Steinbeck put in the mouth of John Wayne when his son Joseph left for the West: “May the blessing of God and my blessing rest on this child. May he live in the light of the Face. May he love his life.”

Note


Peter Lisca (essay date 1958)


[In the following essay, Lisca suggests that Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men relies heavily upon “motifs of symbol, action, and language.”]

Although Of Mice and Men appeared almost exactly one year after In Dubious Battle, two years had elapsed since the strike novel had been completed. The delay this time, however, was not in publication. Covici-Friede received the completed manuscript in September of 1936, and Of Mice and Men was published in February of the following year. Steinbeck had hardly finished the final draft of In Dubious Battle when he wrote to his agents, “I’m doing a play now. I don’t know what will come of it. If I can do it well enough it will be a good play. I mean the theme is swell.” (JS-MO, ca. February, 1935)

While this reference to “a play” probably indicates that Of Mice and Men was in progress two years before its publication, Steinbeck was doing so many other things during this time that attention to the new work must have been sporadic. For one thing, he was deeply involved in the wrangle over the publication of In Dubious Battle, which was not settled until the summer of 1935. For another, his father was very ill that spring and died in June. Also, Steinbeck was
once again trying to get to Mexico for a year to do a novel, but the trip was put off because of the rainy season. (JS-MO, 6/13/35) At the end of August, royalties from Tortilla Flat began coming in, and Steinbeck was once again busy with plans for a Mexican trip to gather material for a new novel. (JS-MO, 8/29/35; JS-BA, 7/14/35) Finally, in September, Steinbeck and his wife drove down to Mexico. He stayed there until the end of the year, but was anxious to get back because by then the “new book” was working him up. On his return he sent his agents two copies of a “new little manuscript,” saying he liked the new title better. (JS-MO, ca. January, 1936) The “new little manuscript” is probably a reference to “The Leader of the People,” since about the same time, Steinbeck wrote Ben Abramson that he was “writing a book for children” (The Red Pony).

Despite these interruptions, however, Of Mice and Men was pretty well along by April, when Steinbeck wrote he was working very hard on the new novel, and again that he had “struck a snag” in the new work. (JS-MO, 4/15/36; 4/20/36) In May he was planning to collect octopi in the low spring tides of Baja California. (JS-MO, 5/15/36) That same month he underwent a baptism which many authors have undergone at some time or other. “Minor tragedy stalked,” he wrote. “My setter pup, left alone one night, made confetti of about half of my manuscript book. Two months work to do over again. It sets me back. There was no other draft. I was pretty mad, but the poor little fellow may have been acting critically. I didn’t want to ruin a good dog for a manuscript I’m not so sure is good at all. He only got an ordinary spanking.” (JS-MO, 5/27/36) It was not until late in August that Steinbeck finished the job of rewriting.1

Steinbeck’s growing reputation and the publishers’ promotion created an eager market for Of Mice and Men even before the book appeared. But although Steinbeck was so poor that he could write excitedly about the acquisition of a kerosene heater for his workroom (“. . warm hands are fine.”), he looked on the hullabaloo with suspicion. “About the Mice book—already, before publication, there has been a lot of nonsense written about it. I’m not sure that I like adulation. I could defend myself against attack. I wish I were as sure I could defend myself against flattery.” (JS-MO, 1/27/37) On the eve of publication he wrote again: “I wish I could be personally elated about all this fuss but I can’t. The book isn’t that good. It’s just one of these crazy streams starting. I’m still not sure Toby didn’t know what he was doing when he ate the first draft. I have promoted Toby to be Lieutenant Colonel in charge of literature. But as for the unpredictable literary enthusiasms of this country—I have little faith in them.” (JS-MO, 2/12/37) This opinion that “The book isn’t that good” is repeated in an article which Steinbeck wrote for Stage just before Of Mice and Men’s Broadway première, but after it had been performed directly from the book by the San Francisco labor-theater group: “The book Of Mice and Men was an experiment and, in what it set out to do, it was a failure.”

Since, in this article and elsewhere, Steinbeck is explicit about what the book “set out to do,” it may be well to examine these intentions before undertaking a critical analysis of the work itself. Steinbeck’s remarks on technique are particularly pertinent because Of Mice and Men was the first of four attempts (to date) in the play-novelette form, the beginnings of which can be seen in some chapters of In Dubious Battle.

As set forth in the Stage article, Steinbeck’s intention was to write a play “in the physical technique of the novel.” This technique was to offer certain advantages. First, “it would go a great way towards making the play easy to read [avoiding awkward and interrupting stage directions].” Second, “the novel’s ability to describe scene and people in detail would not only make for a better visual picture to the reader, but would be of value to the director, stage designer, and actor. . . .” Third, “it would be possible for the playwright by this method to set his tone much more powerfully. . . . And this tone is vastly important.” Steinbeck observes that George Bernard Shaw uses his prefaces for this purpose, but that “the novel form would integrate tone and play in one entity. . . .”

While these advantages would accrue to the play, “the novel itself would be interfered with by such a method in only one way, and that is that it would be short.” But several advantages for the novel would result. For one thing, “the necessity of sticking to the theme (in fact of knowing what the theme is), the brevity and necessity of holding an audience could influence the novel only for the better.” In a play, “wandering, discussion, and essay are impossible.” There is another advantage for the novel which can be “played,” one related to Steinbeck’s group-man theories: “For whatever reasons . . . the recent tendency of writers has been to deal in those themes and those scenes which are best understood and appreciated by groups of people.” Some things (such as war, prize fights on the radio) “cannot be understood in solitude. . . . the thing that is missing is the close,
almost physical contact with other people. . . .” He gives Waiting for Lefty as an example of a work which requires a mass audience for its full effect. Steinbeck explicitly states that he is not advocating this method for the whole field of the novel. The novel of “contemplation, of characterization through analysis, of philosophic discussion is not affected at all by this form.”

So much for the technique. Concerning the book’s theme, Steinbeck wrote his agents, “I’m sorry that you do not find the new book as large in subject as it should be. I probably did not make my subjects and my symbols clear. The microcosm is rather difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over—the earth longings of a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men. Well, if it isn’t there it isn’t there.” (JS-MO, 9/1/36) To Ben Abramson he wrote a similar comment on the book’s theme: “. . . it’s a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world.” (JS-BA, ca. September, 1936)

Such words as “microcosm,” “of all men,” and “everyone in the world” indicate that the problem he set himself in Of Mice and Men was similar to that he had solved in his previous novel, In Dubious Battle. But whereas in the earlier work the de-personalized protagonists were easily absorbed into a greater pattern because that pattern was physically present in the novel, in Of Mice and Men the protagonists are projected against a very thin background and must suggest or create this larger pattern through their own particularity. To achieve this, Steinbeck makes use of language, action, and symbol as recurring motifs. All three of these motifs are presented in the opening scene, are contrapuntally developed through the story, and come together again at the end.

The first symbol in the novel, and the primary one, is the little spot by the river where the story begins and ends. The book opens with a description of this place by the river, and we first see George and Lennie as they enter this place from the highway to an outside world. It is significant that they prefer spending the night here rather than going on to the bunkhouse at the ranch.

Steinbeck’s novels and stories often contain groves, willow thickets by a river, and caves which figure prominently in the action. There are, for example, the grove in To a God Unknown, the place by the river in the Junius Maltby story, the two caves and a willow thicket in The Grapes of Wrath, the cave under the bridge in In Dubious Battle, the caves in The Wayward Bus, and the thicket and cave in The Pearl. For George and Lennie, as for other Steinbeck heroes, coming to a cave or thicket by the river symbolizes a retreat from the world to a primeval innocence. Sometimes, as in The Grapes of Wrath, this retreat has explicit overtones of a return to the womb and rebirth. In the opening scene of Of Mice and Men Lennie twice mentions the possibility of hiding out in a cave, and George impresses on him that he must return to this thicket by the river when there is trouble.

While the cave or the river thicket is a “safe place,” it is physically impossible to remain there, and this symbol of primeval innocence becomes translated into terms possible in the real world. For George and Lennie it becomes “a little house an’ a couple of acres.” Out of this translation grows a second symbol, the rabbits, and this symbol serves several purposes. Through synecdoche it comes to stand for the “safe place” itself, making a much more easily manipulated symbol than the “house an’ a couple of acres.” Also, through Lennie’s love for the rabbits Steinbeck is able not only to dramatize Lennie’s desire for the “safe place,” but to define the basis of that desire on a very low level of consciousness—the attraction to soft, warm fur, which is for Lennie the most important aspect of their plans.

This transference of symbolic value from the farm to the rabbits is important also because it makes possible the motif of action. This is introduced in the first scene by the dead mouse which Lennie is carrying in his pocket (much as Tom carries the turtle in The Grapes of Wrath). As George talks about Lennie’s attraction to mice, it becomes evident that the symbolic rabbits will come to the same end—crushed by Lennie’s simple, blundering strength. Thus Lennie’s killing of mice and later his killing of the puppy set up a pattern which the reader expects to be carried out again. George’s story about Lennie and the little girl with the red dress, which he tells twice, contributes to this expectancy of pattern, as do the shooting of Candy’s dog, the crushing of Curley’s hand, and the frequent appearances of Curley’s wife. All these incidents are patterns of the action motif and predict the fate of the rabbits and thus the fate of the dream of a “safe place.”

The third motif, that of language, is also present in the opening scene. Lennie asks George, “Tell me—like you done before,” and George’s words are obviously in the nature of a ritual. “George’s voice be-
came deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically, as though he had said them many times before.” The element of ritual is stressed by the fact that even Lennie has heard it often enough to remember its precise language: “An’ live off the fatta the lan’ . . . An’ have rabbits. Go on George! Tell about what we’re gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about . . .” This ritual is performed often in the story, whenever Lennie feels insecure. And of course it is while Lennie is caught up in this dream vision that George shoots him, so that on one level the vision is accomplished—the dream never interrupted, the rabbits never crushed.

The highly patterned effect achieved by these incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language is the knife edge on which criticism of Of Mice and Men divides. For although Steinbeck’s success in creating a pattern has been acknowledged, criticism has been divided as to the effect of this achievement. On one side, it is claimed that this strong patterning creates a sense of contrivance and mechanical action, and on the other, that the patterning actually gives a meaningful design to the story, a tone of classic fate. What is obviously needed here is some objective critical tool for determining under what conditions a sense of inevitability (to use a neutral word) should be experienced as mechanical contrivance, and when it should be experienced as catharsis effected by a sense of fate. Such a tool cannot be forged within the limits of this study; but it is possible to examine the particular circumstances of Of Mice and Men more closely before passing judgment.

Although the three motifs of symbol, action, and language build up a strong pattern of inevitability, the movement is not unbroken. About midway in the novel (chapters 3 and 4) there is set up a countermovement which seems to threaten the pattern. Up to this point the dream of “a house an’ a couple of acres” seemed impossible of realization. Now it develops that George has an actual farm in mind (ten acres), knows the owners and why they want to sell it: “The ol’ people that owns it is flat bust an’ the ol’ lady needs an operation.” He even knows the price—“six hundred dollars.” Also, the old workman, Candy, is willing to buy a share in the dream with the three hundred dollars he has saved up. It appears that at the end of the month George and Lennie will have another hundred dollars and that quite possibly they “could swing her for that.” In the following chapter this dream and its possibilities are further explored through Lennie’s visit with Crooks, the power of the dream manifesting itself in Crooks’s conversion from
cynicism to optimism. But at the very height of his conversion the mice symbol reappears in the form of Curley’s wife, who threatens the dream by bringing with her the harsh realities of the outside world and by arousing Lennie’s interest.

The function of Candy’s and Crooks’s interest and the sudden bringing of the dream within reasonable possibility is to interrupt, momentarily, the pattern of inevitability. But, and this is very important, Steinbeck handles this interruption so that it does not actually reverse the situation. Rather, it insinuates a possibility. Thus, though working against the pattern, this countermovement makes that pattern more credible by creating the necessary ingredient of free will. The story achieves power through a delicate balance of the protagonists’ free will and the force of circumstance.

In addition to imposing a sense of inevitability, this strong patterning of events performs the important function of extending the story’s range of meanings. This can best be understood by reference to Hemingway’s “fourth dimension,” which has been defined by Joseph Warren Beach as an “esthetic factor” achieved by the protagonists’ repeated participation in some traditional “ritual or strategy,” and by Malcolm Cowley as “the almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies” suggesting recurrent patterns of human experience. The incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language which inform Of Mice and Men have precisely these effects. The simple story of two migrant workers’ dream of a safe retreat, a “clean well-lighted place,” becomes itself a pattern or archetype which exists on three levels.

There is the obvious story level on a realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also the level of social protest, Steinbeck the reformer crying out against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, its interpretation limited only by the ingenuity of the audience. It could be, as Carlos Baker suggests, “an allegory of Mind and Body.” Using the same kind of dichotomy, the story could also be about the dumb, clumsy, but strong mass of humanity and its shrewd manipulators. This would make the book a more abstract treatment of the two forces of In Dubious Battle—the mob and its leaders. The dichotomy could also be that of the unconscious and the conscious, the id and the ego, or any other forces or qualities which have the same structural relationship to each other that do Lennie and George. It is interesting in this connection that the name Leonard means “strong or brave as a lion,” and that the name George means “husbandman.”
The title itself, however, relates the whole story to still another level which is implicit in the context of Burns’s poem.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,} \\
\text{In proving foresight may be vain:} \\
\text{The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men} \\
\text{Gang aft a-gley} \\
\text{An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain} \\
\text{For promis’d joy.}
\end{align*}
\]

In the poem, Burns extends the mouse’s experience to include that of mankind; in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human condition. “This is the way things are,” both writers are saying. On this level, perhaps the most important, Steinbeck is dramatizing the non-teleological philosophy which had such a great part in shaping *In Dubious Battle* and which would be fully discussed in *Sea of Cortez*. This level of meaning is indicated by the title originally intended for the book—“Something That Happened.”

In this light, the ending of the story is, like the ploughman’s disrupting of the mouse’s nest, neither tragic nor brutal, but simply a part of the pattern of events. It is amusing in this regard that a Hollywood director suggested to Steinbeck that someone else kill the girl, so that sympathy could be kept with Lennie. (JS-MO, 377/38)

In addition to these meanings which grow out of the book’s “pattern,” there is what might be termed a subplot which defines George’s concern with Lennie. It is easily perceived that George, the “husbandman,” is necessary to Lennie; but it has not been pointed out that Lennie is just as necessary to George. Without an explanation of this latter relationship, any allegory posited on the pattern created in *Of Mice and Men* must remain incomplete. Repeatedly, George tells Lennie, “God, you’re a lot of trouble. I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail.” But this getting along so easy never means getting a farm of his own. With one important exception, George never mentions the dream except for Lennie’s benefit. That his own “dream” is quite different from Lennie’s is established early in the novel and often repeated: “God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or anyplace, and order any damn thing I could think of. An’ I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon whiskey, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool.” Lennie has heard this from George so often that in the last scene, when he realizes that he has “done another bad thing,” he asks, “Ain’t you gonna give me hell? . . . Like, ‘If I didn’t have you I’d take my fifty bucks—’.”

Almost every character in the story asks George why he goes around with Lennie—the foreman, Curley, Slim, and Candy. Crooks, the lonely Negro, doesn’t ask George, but he does speculate about it, and shrewdly—“a guy talkin’ to another guy and it don’t make no difference if he don’t hear or understand. The thing is, they’re talkin’. . . .” George’s explanations vary from outright lies to a simple statement of “We travel together.” It is only to Slim, the superior workman with “God-like eyes,” that he tells a great part of the truth. Among several reasons, such as his feeling of responsibility for Lennie in return for the latter’s unfailling loyalty, and their having grown up together, there is revealed another: “He’s dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy. An’ I ain’t so bright neither, or I wouldn’t be buckin’ barley for my fifty and found. If I was even a little bit smart, I’d have my own little place, an’ I’d be bringin’ in my own crops, ’stead of doin’ all the work and not getting what comes up outa the ground.”

This statement, together with George’s repeatedly expressed desire to take his fifty bucks to a cat house and his continual playing of solitaire, reveals that to some extent George needs Lennie as a rationalization for his failure. This is one of the reasons why, after the body of Curley’s wife is discovered, George refuses Candy’s offer of a partnership which would make the dream a reality and says to him, “I’ll work my month an’ I’ll take my fifty bucks an’ I’ll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I’ll set in some poolroom till everbody goes home. An’ then I’ll come back an’ work another month an’ I’ll have fifty bucks more.” The dream of the farm originates with Lennie and it is only through Lennie, who also makes the dream impossible, that the dream has any meaning for George. An understanding of this dual relationship will do much to mitigate the frequent charge that Steinbeck’s depiction of George’s attachment is concocted of pure sentimentality. At the end of the novel, George’s going off with Slim to “do the town” is more than an escape from grief. It is an ironic and symbolic twist to his dream.

The “real” meaning of the book is neither in the realistic action nor in the levels of allegory. Nor is it in some middle course. Rather, it is in the pattern which informs the story both on the realistic and the allegorical levels, a pattern which Steinbeck took pains to prevent from becoming either trite or mechanical.
But whether because of its realism, its allegory, or its pattern, *Of Mice and Men* was an immediate popular success. It appeared on best-seller lists, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and was sold to Hollywood. This financial success made it possible for Steinbeck to do some traveling, and in the spring of 1937 he left San Francisco for New York, traveling his favorite way, by freighter via the Panama Canal. Steinbeck stayed briefly in New York to see his agents and publishers, reluctantly attended a dinner for Thomas Mann (in a borrowed suit), and in the middle of May sailed for England aboard a Swedish freighter. He traveled to his mother’s homeplace in Ireland, over to Sweden, and then to Russia, which country he found as bewildering in its own way as Mexico had been.

Before leaving on this trip, Steinbeck had been working on a dramatization of *Of Mice and Men*, and on his return to New York early in August (aboard another freighter) he stayed at George Kaufman’s farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and with some advice from Kaufman, who was to direct it, finished the final version of the play. *Of Mice and Men* opened on November 23, 1937, on the stage of the Music Box theater in New York and won great critical and popular acclaim. It brought Steinbeck the Drama Critics’ Circle Award in a season which had also seen *Our Town*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Golden Boy*, and *Prologue to Glory*. On the very first ballot, *Of Mice and Men* got nine votes to a total of seven for all the others. The citation ran as follows:

The New York Drama Critics’ Circle awards its prize to John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men” for its direct force and perception in handling a theme genuinely rooted in American life; for its bite into the strict quality of its material; for his refusal to make this study of tragic loneliness and frustration either cheap or sensational; and finally for its simple, intense and steadily rising effect on the stage.*

Steinbeck had not stayed for the laurels. Upon completing the stage version, and not even waiting for the play to be produced, he went to Detroit, bought a car, and, after visiting Ben Abramson in Chicago, drove to Oklahoma. There he joined a group of migrant workers heading west, lived with them in their Hooversvilles, and worked with them when they got to California. He was already writing *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Notes**

1. Harry Thornton Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck* (Chicago, 1939), p. 86, states that this incident did not occur “until after type had been set and proofs corrected,” but this letter is explicit about there being “no other draft” and there being “two month’s work to do over again.” Moore’s contention is disproved also by Steinbeck’s letter of February 12, quoted below. Some twenty years later, Steinbeck repeated the story about the pup and added, “I don’t know how close the first and second versions would prove to be.” (“My Short Novels,” *Wings*, October, 1953, p. 6.)

2. John Steinbeck, “The novel might benefit by the discipline, the terseness . . . ;” *Stage* (January, 1938), pp. 50-51. Although this article was published while *Of Mice and Men* was on Broadway, the editors inform us that it had been submitted earlier.


5. “How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?” *Sewanee Review*, 59 (Spring, 1951), pp. 311-328.


**Notes**

To a God Unknown. New York: Robert O. Ballou, 1933.


Joan Steele (essay date winter 1972)


[In the following essay, Steele compares Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men with Charles Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge, arguing that the two authors had in common an empathy towards suffering, demonstrated through their sympathetic portrayals of mentally challenged characters Lennie and Barnaby.]

His work is a vast, fascinating, paradoxical universe . . . a celebration of goodness and innocence; a display of chaos, violence, corruption and decadence. It is no neatly shaped and carefully-cultivated garden of artistic perfections, but a sprawling continent of discordant extremes: warmth, tenderness and subtlety, but also tastelessness, crudity, and sentimentality; brilliant comedy mixed with adolescent facetiousness; intense human charity and magnanimity fading off into lax and shallow morality; powerful vision beside superficial and pretentious preaching.

These words of the English critic F. W. Watt appraise the work of John Steinbeck. Taken out of context they seem equally apt to describe that of Charles Dickens. A century is not a barrier between two artists who share similar world views. In his review of Sweet Thursday entitled “A Narrow-gauge Dickens,” Hugh Holman draws an explicit analogy between the two authors. He states that Steinbeck “shares with Charles Dickens the failure to subject his people [either with or without the external pressures of society] to an organized and logically consistent philosophy.”

This echoes George Santayana’s opinion that Dickens “had no ideas on any subject; what he had was a vast sympathetic participation in the daily life of mankind; and what he saw of ancient institutions made him hate them, as needless sources of oppression, misery, selfishness and rancour.” One way to circumvent the problem of philosophical inconsistency is to deny the validity of all systems. Steinbeck did this in Sea of Cortez when he defined his concept of “non-teleological thinking” as that which “considers events as outgrowths and expressions rather than as results . . . not with what could be, or should be, or might be, but rather with what actually ‘is’—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how instead of why.”

If Dickens and Steinbeck are similar in their lack of systematic philosophy, they also share many other more positive characteristics noted by Hugh Holman: a tender spirit, sensitivity to suffering, and forgiveness of weakness and failure—as well as fascination for, and great success with the portrayal of eccentrics, grotesques, idiots, children, and childlike states of mind (p. 20). One of the most provocative parallels in the work of these two men is their use of idiot and non-rational characters. A comparison of Barnaby Rudge and Of Mice and Men shows how, through the portrayal of an idiot’s relationship to society, the characters of Barnaby and Lennie reveal their authors’ social attitudes.

From the title character’s first appearance in the third chapter of Barnaby Rudge he moves through the book haphazardly, juxtaposed with both “normal” and “abnormal” characters. Most of these people attempt to manipulate him in some way, either directly like his companion Hugh, or indirectly like Lord George Gordon, the leader of the Protestant “Gordon Riots” which comprise much of the action of the novel. Barnaby’s relations with his mother, Mr. Haredale, and Gabriel Varden permit Dickens to comment on his mental condition through the eyes of respected members of the community. But Barnaby is also surrounded by foils who represent in complex ways other facets of sub-rational or irrational humanity. Symbolically, Gordon, Gashford, Dennis, Sim, Hugh, and even Sir John Chester are representatives of various types of derangement. In his perceptive study of the novel Harold F. Folland directs attention to the prevalence of the word “mad” and its synonyms, as well as to the wide range of irrationality displayed by the riot leaders, who include “Gordon, a deluded visionary, Barnaby, a harmless imbecile with a vivid imagination, Hugh, a magnificently powerful animal whose rudimentary reason is undeveloped and untrained, and Dennis, [a] hangman with a pathologically sadistic love for his job, whose reason is narrow and perverted.” Yet these allegorical leaders are not as crazy as the true leader, Sir John Chester—an instance of the deception possible when appearance and reality are confused. For the real villain in Barnaby Rudge is Sir John, who—even if he is not a
lampoon of Lord Chesterfield—is certainly symbolic of the irresponsibility of the upper classes. On the political level Sir John is the prime manipulator and evil genius behind the riots. He also functions as one of five irresponsible fathers in the novel whose social role may represent the political irresponsibility displayed by the upper classes of the time—another kind of group madness. Dickens’ madmen are saved from caricature because they function in established social roles; the nature of the leadership is itself a commentary by Dickens on the nature of these destructive riots, which run rampant over individual rights. Barnaby and Gordon represent lesser evils because their flaw is one of omission rather than commission, although their gullibility makes them serve Chester’s evil ends.

Dickens places Barnaby as an individual character on a broad and complex canvas. Yet as a symbolic character rather than a convincing protagonist, Barnaby is really tangential to the action. In contrast, Of Mice and Men depends upon the relationship between Lennie and George: it is society’s treatment of them which is symbolic. In Steinbeck we are dealing with symbolic action, in Dickens with symbolic characterization. In Barnaby Rudge the characters play their roles in the riot because of their character traits; indeed they are riot participants because of their mentalities. In Of Mice and Men the focus is on society’s role in relation to the protagonists. Both novels, however, succeed in reflecting the disparate problems of their societies.

We see this even in such a matter as title. Dickens uses the name of an individual—an “idiot”—for the title of his novel, yet the action transcends the fate of Barnaby or of any one character and presents a view of social relationships beyond the limits of time and place. Steinbeck chooses a title with a broad scope, one which is meant to imply the universality of the novel’s message, but the action is focused on the microcosm of two seemingly unimportant members of contemporary society. We see clearly in Of Mice and Men the dilemma of human relationships that Steinbeck perfects and amplifies in The Grapes of Wrath.

Criticists and literary psychologists have studied the mental aberrations of both Barnaby and Lennie to gain insight into their authors’ rationales. Both Barnaby and Lennie are idiots insofar as they exist outside of time. They have little conception of the passage of time. Barnaby thinks it must be his birthday when his mother appears to be upset and distraught, since this is her usual manner on that day which recalls such unpleasant memories. But his birthday had passed just a few short weeks before. Lennie cannot remember the events that took place in Weed when they were run out of town after he fondled the girl’s dress. Barnaby can picture a life of peace and happiness resulting from the violence of mob action only because he is incapable of understanding reality. Barnaby’s importance makes some analysis of his mental state crucial to an understanding of his symbolic function, although it is not necessary to go so far as L. M. H. Brush’s “case history” in which she analyzes him as a “clear case of a regression psychosis of the paralysiatric type, wholly psychogenic in origin.” When Barnaby first appears, Dickens uses dialogue skillfully to convey the quality of the idiot’s derangement. Barnaby and Gabriel Varden have discovered a mysterious wounded man:

“Hush!” said Barnaby, laying his fingers upon his lips. “He went out to-day a-wooing. I wouldn’t for a light guinea that he should never go a-wooing again, for, if he did, some eyes would grow dim that are not as bright as—see, when I talk of eyes, the stars come out! Whose eyes are they? If they are angels’ eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt, and only wink and sparkle all the night?”

“I can’t touch him!” cried the idiot falling back, and shuddering as with a strong spasm; “he’s bloody!”

The disjointed speech with its symbolic mention of the stars serving as eyes to differentiate appearance from reality turns swiftly to the monomania of Barnaby’s blood-fixation. Thus two essential elements of his character are established through both the tone and content of his speech.

Barnaby and Lennie are both intimately involved with animals, and both have unusual dreams that are important manifestations of their symbolic roles. Barnaby is an idiot who exists at the level of childhood and only briefly rises from that level. Abandoned by a villainous father, his devotion to his mother is intense. He is close to nature and animals, especially to the brutish Hugh of Maypole and to his pet raven, Grip, who functions actively in the story. That Dickens foresaw a purposive relationship between Barnaby and his pet is evident in his letter of 28 January 1841 to George Cattermole: “Barnaby being an idiot, my notion is to have him always in company with a pet raven, who is immeasurably more knowing than himself.” The raven voices Dickens’ negative view of rebellion through his constant rep-
etition of “I’m a devil,” and Dickens calls him “the embodied spirit of evil” in Chapter XXV (p. 192). Grip also barks like a dog, which links him to the animality of Hugh and foreshadows Barnaby’s sheltering of Hugh’s dog after his friend’s execution.

Barnaby’s relationship with Hugh is more complex. Hugh lures him into joining the mob, and continues to lead him throughout the riots. Dickens makes his condition quite clear. Hugh resembles Barnaby, but Hugh is so grotesque that, according to Folland, he is “dehumanized and unable to use his strength rationally in his own behalf” (p. 410). Barnaby’s moral superiority is evident from Hugh’s admission that Barnaby’s prayers suffice for them both.

The interrelated roles of these three characters are important. Although Grip speaks of himself as being evil, he does nothing evil—indeed he is offered no alternatives. Hugh constantly makes choices for evil, while Barnaby does not choose—he is good. All three are involved in a social action which Dickens depletes, but only the activist pays the penalty.

Steinbeck’s use of animals is different. They are symbolic, passive stage props that increase the depth of the action. The mouse that Lennie fondles and kills is merely the precursor of the puppy that meets the same end. The puppy in turn foreshadows the fate of Curley’s wife. Perhaps Steinbeck was thinking of the slang “mouse” to refer to a woman. Certainly Curley’s wife is repeatedly called a “rat trap” and a “bitch,” although she really deserves her fate no more than the helpless puppy. The mouse’s fate is that of all men, Steinbeck seems to be saying, and insofar as this is true he changes Burn’s meaning, for Burn’s quotation implies that plans may go wrong, while the action of Of Mice and Men indicates that such plans will go wrong.

Barnaby’s plans appear in dreams of gold reflected in the gleam of the rural sunset as “that gold which is piled up yonder in the sky” (p. 342). The gold is an end in itself: “a rare thing, and say what you will, a thing you would like to have, I know,” as he says to his mother (p. 361). But this gold is suffused in the vague haze of wish-fulfillment reflected by the metaphoric connection of wealth to nature’s beauty. Significantly, it is to the peace of rural seclusion that Barnaby will retire at the end of the book. He had dreamed of an urban glory through participation in the storming of the London bastions, but his future is to be rural, for Dickens states in his conclusion that Barnaby could not be persuaded to return to the city.

We almost envy Barnaby both his escape and his idiocy. Dickens’ negative view of group social action, subject to delusion and manipulation by irresponsible leaders, is reinforced by the double image of escape from reality implied in Barnaby’s idiocy and his retreat to a rural idyll.

In contrast to Barnaby’s dreams of gold and urban glory, Lennie dreams of a practical rural life, detailed even to the descriptions of its daily chores. He and George aspire to a small piece of land that will make them part of a stable and secure society instead of its migratory fringes. George ritualy repeats, “we’d belong there . . . we’d know what comes of our planting.” Lennie and George’s dream is more than materialistic; it envisions a place where “nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from ‘em” (p. 116). In fact, as the Negro, Crooks, sees only too clearly, it is “just like heaven. . . . Nobody ever gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land” (p. 81). Yet George and Lennie’s piece of land has a specific setting in time and place, and they believe they can achieve their dream through real means.

Barnaby is better off for not achieving his goal, as Dickens makes clear by his linking of blood and gold in Mrs. Rudge’s speech: “Do you not see,” she said, “how red it is? Nothing bears so many stains of blood, as gold” (p. 342). But Barnaby as an idiot never thinks beyond the abstract image of the glittering gold and would not have known what to do with it if his dream became reality. Lennie and George’s defeat is much more humanly tragic in its effect, for their dream could have come true and together they could have made it work.

In addition to dreams of the future, both idiots have hallucinatory visions that reveal a great deal about them. As Brush observes, Barnaby’s narrative dreams contain faces that are “images of the daytime people with their sneers, grins, and teasings” (p. 29). But he also has symbolic dream-nightmares marked by specters and a gothic horror of blood: “Is it in the room as I have seen it in my dreams, dashing the ceiling and the walls with red?” he asks his mother hysterically (p. 133). Although Dickens’ conception of Barnaby’s dreams is psychologically valid, he uses it more superficially than does Steinbeck. Given Barnaby’s history, he would fear both ridicule and blood; his hallucinations do not function to explain deep character or action as Lennie’s final visions do.

Lennie also has two kinds of dreams. His narrative dream is of a reality from the past—Aunt Clara and her frighteningly true analysis of his future plight,
phrased in emphatic language: “And then from out of Lennie’s head there came a little fat old woman. She wore thick bull’s-eye glasses and she wore a huge gingham apron with pockets, and she was starched and clean. . . . ‘You’re always sayin’ that [‘I won’t be no more trouble to George’] an’ you know snot-fabitching well you ain’t never gonna do it’” (pp. 110-111). But Lennie’s symbolic hallucination is most important. Like Barnaby’s blood fear, Lennie’s fixation arises from the farthest depths of his mind in the form of a gigantic rabbit. This is doubly a dream rabbit, for it is the symbol of the utopian farm, made monstrous in size and cruel in speech. It sneers and grins at Lennie, and teases him, while, because it speaks in his own voice, it makes Lennie himself appear to be dream-like and visionary. The dream-rabbit’s berating of Lennie prepares the reader for the catastrophe, for when one’s most cherished dream turns upon one, it is indeed the death of hope.

Lennie’s animals, real and imaginary, are better foils for him as a skillfully characterized idiot than are Barnaby’s. Lennie does not have an understanding of his relationship to these animals as Barnaby seems to have with Grip. The idea of the talking raven as an idiot’s foil is also a bit too pat for the modern reader to accept; one would prefer to think of the idiot as having at least the same level of intelligence as the animals that function symbolically.

Dickens, as we have seen, oversimplifies Barnaby in a world beyond his understanding so that we almost envy him. This idealization of instinctive good by placing it upon an idiot is a kind of anti-intellectual sentimentality which causes the theme of the novel to founder. Modern critics have charged Steinbeck with similar sentimentality and anti-intellectualism. Frederick J. Hoffman objects to Steinbeck’s reduction of man to the animal level, noting that “the idiots of Steinbeck’s fiction are a case in point; there is no attempt to make us realize their idiocy in the perspective of a larger fictional strategy; instead we are reduced to a comparable sub-rational level of appreciation and sympathy.” Yet it is most important to see Steinbeck’s treatment as highly metaphorical. All men are animals; when one of them fails to transcend this animal level in his social relationships it is a cause for sorrow to the whole human race. Thus, the only real obligation an author has is to make his character believable—to make, in this case, the delineation of an abnormal state of mind so plausible as to cause the reader to accept the fiction wholly. Once the reader has entered into the sphere of belief, has established a rapport with the character, idiot or not, then he will be able to see the “larger fictional strategy” which involves, in Lennie’s case, the symbolic use of the abnormal personality toward a specific end. Steinbeck had a particular goal in mind with Lennie. He “was to be, not a pathetic cretin, but a symbolic figure with earth longings, a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all, but the inarticulate and powerful yearnings of all men.”

In contrast to Barnaby’s relations with a large number of characters, George is the pivot around which Lennie revolves. Of Mice and Men’s believability results from their reciprocal relationship. Although George is a father-figure to Lennie and has the position of authority, he often complains that if it were not for Lennie he could be free to sojourn in “cat houses” and drink quantities of rotgut booze. Yet George does not really want this kind of freedom. He prefers the dream that he and Lennie share, and he would never attain that dream without Lennie. Paradoxically, he cannot attain the dream with Lennie either, for Lennie’s mentality makes the conscious striving for any goal impossible. But Lennie keeps the dream alive for George. He tells Candy that Lennie “uesta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would” (p. 103). George is not a pathetic character, as many critics have contended, for, as Warren French notes, he has “a will and he exercises it to make two critical decisions at the end of the novel—to kill Lennie and to lie about it.” He is really killing that aspect of himself that Lennie represents. When he goes off with Slim, abandoning the possibility of joining with Candy and his nest-egg, Steinbeck indicates that it is only the mentally muddled who ever believe in the fulfillment of dreams—the rational mind sees the truth of Burns’s quotation.

In Of Mice and Men there are only ten characters, but each can be read as a kind of synecdoche for his social group. George as Lennie’s surrogate father does not evade his responsibility. Moreover, George’s role is both paternal and fraternal; the brotherhood that exists between these two makes their harsh life bearable for both. As George puts it: “We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us” (p. 15). The characters that move about this pair are strongly linked to the themes of the novel. The Boss is a peripheral figure—one of strong but remote authority, and freedom of action. (Only he and Slim have been in Crooks’ room.) The Boss represents the non-laboring man; he wears high-heeled boots and spurs to distinguish him from his workmen. But his authority is too remote and borders on irresponsibility as
we see through the actions of his son Curley, a wild and vicious troublemaker who cannot control either his own life or his wife. Slim, the head mule-skinner, on the other hand, represents the proper use of authority: “His word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love” (p. 37). It is significant that Slim is apparently of the same social class as Lennie and George; he transcended their limitations and has thereby become a kind of liaison between the groups.

Crucial to the development of theme is Crooks. He represents both a group and a condition; he is a Negro and he is maimed. We learn that Crooks once had the kind of earth attachment—“the little chicken ranch” of his childhood—that Lennie and George want. It did not work then for him because of his color, and he withdraws from participation in the present dream when he is degraded by his cultural enemy, white womanhood.

Another maimed grotesque is Candy, the “swamper,” whose defects are his age and his loss of a hand. Candy wants to invest his $300 in the dream, but Steinbeck suggests that he is unworthy because he will not, or cannot, accept responsibility. Where George forces himself to shoot Lennie to keep him from suffering, Candy cannot bring himself to shoot his suffering old dog and lets Carlson do it for him. To reinforce the analogy, Candy reacts to the death of the dog and the death of Lennie in nearly the same way: “He rolled slowly over and faced the wall and lay silent” (p. 54) on hearing Carlson’s shot; “Old Candy lay down in the hay and covered his eyes with his arm” (p. 108) as the men go out after Lennie.

Because George has been able to live up to his responsibilities, he dispatches Lennie to his only hope of “that place”—through death, and then throws the gun on the ashes of their old campfire—the ashes of a dream. It is Slim who understands George’s state of mind at this moment. They go off together to the town, away from the blasted and withered dream by the banks of the peaceful river.

This discussion of similar elements in Dickens and Steinbeck opened with a criticism of Steinbeck that seemed equally valid for Dickens. The likeness is reinforced by George Orwell’s comments on Dickens: “His radicalism is of the vaguest kind and yet one always knows that it is there. That is the difference between being a moralist and a politician. He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong.” Steinbeck, like Dickens, promotes reform rather than revolution. Although his work is full of violence he does not persuade to violence but rather to amelioration through human understanding. Steinbeck, despite his whores and vulgarity, is a moralist because he uses the novelist’s tools to describe elements of his society that cry out for change, and because his is essentially a moral view that seeks what Peter Lisca calls “adjustment through mutual understanding and acceptance.” At the same time Lisca is quite correct in denying that *Of Mice and Men* is a “glorification of idiocy” (p. 15). Beneath the deceptively smooth surface of the novel lie turbulent forces. Lennie’s catastrophe results more from his irresponsibility and violence than from his idiocy. Lennie’s utopia has to be destroyed because he is a “loner” whose madness precludes his cooperating with George and hence working constructively toward their mutual goal. Steinbeck tells us that mass society is an evil, against which the individual has no chance unless he unites with others to achieve his goals. Irresponsible individualism brings death and destruction.

Dickens enlisted the Gordon Riots of a hundred years earlier in his plea for a better understanding of the problems of his own times, and chose several irrational characters to present the negative as an inducement toward the positive. Barnaby can survive because he is the most passively innocent element from the irrational “complex.” Barnaby does not get the kind of utopia he dreams of, but he gets a substitute that is nearer to the dream than he realizes. Once removed from a milieu he never comprehends, he attains a kind of peaceful individual seclusion that in its way is quite relevant to Dickens’ conception of the value of the individual.

Given these two works and the significant differences a close analysis reveals, why should John Steinbeck in the twentieth century be considered a “narrow-gauge Dickens”? Both men were products of the middle class from which they rose to positions of eminence transcending class boundaries. Early in their careers both shared an unconcern for abstract philosophical systems along with a deep concern for society and its members. The result was that both built their social themes on character and delineated unique characters whose work is personal and microcosmic. “Dickenstan” is a convenient cliché that embraces “originals” like Mr. Dick, Mr. Micawber, Jenny Wren, and Miss Havisham, as well as Fauna, Joseph and Mary Rivas, Hazel, and Grandpa Joad. Because they develop philosophic patterns that originate in human relationships, both authors ex-
pend their talents on the detailed characterization and description that create “originals.” Possibly the early picaresque Dickens and the late picaresque Steinbeck have reversed their patterns of growth. But critics today see much more in Pickwick than did readers of the nineteenth century. It would not be surprising if succeeding generations found more than convivial sentimentality in Steinbeck’s later work.

Notes


John F. Slater (essay date 1974)


[In the following excerpted essay, Slater outlines the mixed critical reception of Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men over the course of its publishing history and notes that the story reflects Steinbeck’s concerns about being an artist in the 1930s era.]

Although Of Mice and Men is not the best case in point, one of the most prominent characteristics of the Steinbeck phenomenon is that his reputation among academic critics has fluctuated drastically during the past three decades. The general tide has flowed and ebbed, and some individuals, such as Harry T. Moore, have gone so far as zealously to recant previous commendations. Given Steinbeck’s rather special status among the writers of his era, such shifts in opinion have been inevitable. In the first place, Steinbeck made himself hard to grasp. His technical variations are incessant and programmatic, and yet he seems to return, time and again, to the same motifs, the same types of characters, the same landscape. What is more, Steinbeck addressed literary critics, responsible to uncompromising artistic standards, at the same time that he consistently attracted a very broad popular audience, readers who looked for entertainment, inspiration, information, but were under no obligation to weigh Steinbeck’s stylistic nuances as consciously as trained professionals. The scene was further complicated by Steinbeck’s receiving the Nobel Prize when his best work was behind him.

On the other hand, Steinbeck’s career has been pawn to historical developments operating beyond the sphere of his personal influence. These developments may well have reduced scholarly interest in Of Mice and Men. Most obviously, World War II and its aftermath made the Depression and its byproducts seem outmoded and thus deprived Steinbeck of a most fertile subject matter. More subtly, the 1950s, the decade during which enthusiasm for Steinbeck suffered its greatest decline, witnessed an intellectual climate on American campuses which was alien to the very qualities Steinbeck most prized—stylistic flexibility and daring, and close engagement with public, frequently universal issues. Among professors of literature, the 1950s were the high-water mark of T. S. Eliot, the principles of New Criticism, and the ascetic technique of close critical analysis. Metaphysical poetry, with its stress on psychic interiors and elegant design, was much in vogue. Fiction that accommodated itself to the reigning method of inquiry usually received the highest praise; but many
writers, including Steinbeck, were not interested in conforming to the favored prescriptions, although Of Mice and Men certainly could have satisfied the most fastidious disciples of Eliot’s school.

Students, on their part, were profoundly introverted, skeptical about the effectiveness of political action, defensively elitist in their literary tastes. There was a great revival of interest in theater—in some instances the number of self-supporting productions during any one semester was prodigious—but the most ambitious undertakings were largely in behalf of the dramatists for whom Eliot was the most eloquent apologist, the Elizabethans and the Stuarts, rather than experimental new talent. It was as though undergraduates had relinquished any claim on the idiom of their own future and were content to enact their dreams of progress accompanied by the ringing cadences of centuries-old blank verse. The retreat was away from the dynamic arena of contemporary concern into the relatively immobile inheritance of the proscenium arch. Dramatic art promised a world distinctly different from daily life, a world that was austere, patrician, pure, and students vigorously moved to occupy it. Such a climate afforded little space to Steinbeck and Of Mice and Men, a novel animated by the premise that all men possess the dramatic impulse and exhibit it in their commonest pursuits.

In terms of literary criticism, Leslie Fiedler’s controversial book Love and Death in the American Novel ushered in the revolution of the 1960s. The controversy centered on Fiedler’s thesis that the American novel is distinguished by an archetypal sequence of close relationships between “male pairs,” such as Huck Finn and Jim, that border on what Fiedler now calls, with some reservations, the “homoerotic.” Fiedler’s contention helps place Of Mice and Men in an important historical tradition, although no one would quarrel with Burton Rascoe’s early assessment that “the relationship between George and Lennie is a paradigm of all the nonphysical, nonsexual (let us use the so tritely inadequate and now almost meaningless word ‘spiritual’ to help out in indicating the meaning) emotions, concerns, and aspirations in the world.” But Fiedler provided another kind of access, as well, to the reader who sought to base his admiration of Steinbeck on the soldest possible ground. Fiedler impatiently rejected the strictures of New Criticism and reasserted the right, even of academic critics, to share the motivations of general readers who view factors other than artistic performance—factors such as the light a given novel might shed on cultural continuities—as valid if not indeed essential dimensions of reading activity.

In our own time, as much in consequence of an ever lengthening thaw in the academic environment as of relaxed, exploratory preferences among the young, it is possible to view Steinbeck from every available perspective without inhibition. Of Mice and Men is relevant to current concerns, including the concern of students to be subjective, even sentimental, free from fear of recrimination while reserving the right to be tough-minded about immutable realities when occasion requires. A generation of students that introduced the word “scenario” to the lexicon of political activism can appreciate Steinbeck’s abiding interest in the wellsprings of social drama. Furthermore, powerful sympathy has revived for the downtrodden protagonists Steinbeck chronicled. Like George and Lennie, many young people profess to “give a damn,” and their experience often vindicates the use of the slogan. Thoreau’s vision of a life uncluttered by academic sophistication has won new adherents—and has its counterpart in Lennie and George’s dream of a farm of their own. Salinas remains the scene of economic and social friction, and even Soledad has lent its name to the headlines. Of Mice and Men proves no exception to the renewed timeliness of Steinbeck’s work.

In invoking the much abused word “relevant,” however, it is necessary to observe the caution as well as the courage that Richard Poirier displays when he discusses the word in his recent book The Performing Self. “The term,” he writes, “is in itself a cause for confusion. For if English studies is to become more ‘relevant’ to anything, shouldn’t it be first of all made more ‘relevant’ to English literature?” One function of Poirier’s language must be to sanction study of the relationship between Of Mice and Men and appropriate American works that preceded or, in some instances, followed it, including of course Steinbeck’s own. So unusual a book scarcely runs the risk of appearing derivative; on the contrary, much benefit can accrue from showing that Steinbeck’s novel, however unorthodox, is nevertheless responsive to what D. H. Lawrence called the “classic” American tradition.

In his groundbreaking book Studies in Classic American Literature, D. H. Lawrence talks at length about The Deerslayer. Cooper’s novel is probably a remote source of the yearning for peaceful independence that infects Of Mice and Men, although so many other prominent writers, such as Emerson and Whitman, have perpetuated the theme that no single source is outstanding. Elsewhere in his work, most notably in To a God Unknown, Steinbeck returned to the leg-
end of founding a dynasty in the wilderness that Cooper had initiated in another of the Leatherstocking Tales, The Pioneers. It is worth noting in anticipation of further discussion that the image of the “trap” so pervasive in Of Mice and Men is also active in The Deerslayer. One aspect of The Deerslayer Lawrence found especially absorbing was the difference between the two Hutter sisters: “The two girls are the inevitable dark and light. Judith, dark, fearless, passionate, a little lurid with sin, is the scarlet-and-black blossom. Hetty, the younger, blonde, frail and innocent, is the white lily again. But alas, the lily has begun to fester. She is slightly imbecile.” The rhetorical means Cooper devised to communicate Hetty’s simpleness of the future was her constant confusion of the literal and figurative meanings of words. “Mother used to call heaven the future, but you seem to think it means next week, or tomorrow!” she laments to Judith at one point. The relationship of such confusion to Of Mice and Men starts to be apparent when Steinbeck explains what he intended Lennie to convey to readers. He mentions Lennie’s “earth longings” and then goes on to say that Lennie “was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men.” The passage from Cooper suggests an incipient version of the much blunter exchange Steinbeck was to compose in order to dramatize Lennie’s inarticulateness:

‘Don’t let him pull you in—but—if the son-of-a-bitch socks you—let ’im have it.’

‘Let ’im have what, George?’

Hetty’s literalistic response to the Bible also finds some analogy in Lennie’s trusting response to George’s visions or, for that matter, in Tularecito’s naïve responses to stories in The Pastures of Heaven: “But Tularecito continued his careful drawing, only pausing now and then to blink at the teacher and to try to understand how these distant accounts of the actions of strangers could be of interest to anyone. To him they were chronicles of actual events—else why were they written down. The stories were like the lessons.”

Lawrence’s discussion of Cooper concludes that the white man, like the two phases of white womanhood symbolized by Hetty and Judith, “is divided against himself. He plays off one side of himself against the other side, till it is really a tale told by an idiot, and nauseating.” Lawrence ends the Cooper chapter by saying, “This is the very intrinsic-most American. He is at the core of all the other flux and fluff. And when this man breaks from his static isolation, and makes a new move, then look out, something will be happening.” In terms of literary history, the “something” that happened was startling. As if in reaction to Lawrence’s hint about “a tale told by an idiot,” William Faulkner, in 1929, published The Sound and the Fury.

Steinbeck’s own novel “Something That Happened,” the original title of Of Mice and Men, bears some resemblance to Faulkner’s work although, as several commentators have rightly stated, the general similarities between the two men and their works are surprisingly slight. In its opening section, The Sound and the Fury is in fact a tale told by an idiot, not about one, and therein lies a crucial distinction. Even so, the novel from the outset exploits verbal confusion of the sort observable in Cooper and Steinbeck. Benjy Compson, the imbecile through whose eyes the story is viewed, mistakes a nearby golfer’s cries of “caddy” for the name of his beloved sister, “Caddy.” And the confusion is aggravated by the Black youngster, Luster, who teases Benjy in somewhat the same fashion that Crooks for awhile teases Lennie. Furthermore, Benjy, like Lennie, has a history of frightening girls in a way misconstrued as sexual assault, and his downfall occurs on Easter Sunday, when his brother Jason finally decides to commit him to an institution. Lennie’s fate on the weekend when Of Mice and Men takes place only dimly parallels the events of the Crucifixion, probably because Steinbeck chose not to oppress his narrative with symbolic allusions far beyond the capacity of his characters to invent or detect. The presence of the parallels is still undeniable and offers further testimony that Steinbeck, in his own manner, was attuned to the same literary rhythms that interested Faulkner at the time.

Another writer who deserves special comment in reference to Steinbeck and Of Mice and Men is Eugene O’Neill. Writing about his play Burning Bright, Steinbeck mentioned his efforts to suggest a “universal language”: “While I had eminent authority for this method from Aeschylus down through O’Neill, it was still problematical whether audiences used to the modern realistic theater would accept such expression.” Of Mice and Men is an example of the “realistic theater” Steinbeck referred to, and in any case his experiment with “a novel that can be played” finds its precedent at least as far back in American literature as the “Midnight, Forecastle” chapter of Moby Dick. In light of Lennie’s nature, it is worthwhile recalling that Melville’s drama revolves around Pip, Ahab’s mentally retarded protégé. Melville based
Pip on Lear’s fool in Shakespeare, but in *Billy Bud* he produced his own quite independent version of a character who, at least under stress, is pathologically inarticulate and expresses himself through violent physical action with disastrous consequences. Like Melville, O’Neill often wrote of the sea, and several of his plays show Melville’s influence. In turn, O’Neill anticipated certain aspects of Steinbeck. *To a God Unknown*, for example, is somewhat reminiscent of *Desire Under the Elms*, and The Hairy Ape foreshadows *Of Mice and Men* with prisonlike stage settings that symbolize the self-imposed limitations of dramatic method as well as the restricted lives of the characters, so that technique and theme reinforce each other with compounded incisiveness.

Throughout Steinbeck, in fact, rhetorical arrangements, however liberated compared with ordinary ones, complement the victimization of characters by uncontrollable, even unrecognizable imperatives latent in nature and in manmade systems like the rudimentary verbal ones the characters themselves put together. Thus when the reader of *Of Mice and Men* submits to the exciting flow of unfolding events, he also perceives himself in the presence of an architectural scheme analogous to the rise-and-fall trajectory of classical drama. This recognition of the novel’s structural integrity reveals that, even as they manipulate one another, Steinbeck’s characters are as subservient to the dictates of his master plan as to the urgencies of natural impulse.

To implement the economy of an “experiment” in dramatic form, Steinbeck communicated the parallels he sensed between natural and rhetorical forces by focusing on a specific image in *Of Mice and Men*, the image of a “trap.” Most obviously, he used the slang word for “mouth,” “trap,” to suggest that even apparently casual utterances can hem men in. He did this repeatedly at salient moments in other books also, demonstrating his care, shared with O’Neill, for the all-important metaphors of colloquial speech. At the start of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad, just released from prison—one kind of “trap”—related imprisonment to the traps of ordinary discourse: “But look, when you been in stir a little while, you can smell a question comin’ from hell to breakfast. You telegraphed yours the first time you opened your trap.” Earlier in the conversation, the truck driver Tom has been talking to “knew he was being trapped” by Tom’s words, “but couldn’t see the way out.” In *In Dubious Battle*, Jim complains to Doc, “You build a trap of words and then you fall into it.” And in *To a God Unknown*, an exchange between Thomas and Joseph implies that the dangers endemic in common talk may well multiply in an atmosphere of conscious artifice, “ceremony” or “ritual”:

> ‘. . . I was afraid there was some ceremony.’
>
> ‘You are afraid of every kind of ritual, Thomas. Do you know why?’ Joseph slowed his horse so that Thomas could come closer.
>
> ‘No, I don’t know why,’ Thomas admitted slowly, ‘it seems a trap, a kind of little trap.’”

An explicit “trap” reference occurs in *Of Mice and Men* when Curley’s wife says to Crooks, “‘Listen, Nigger, . . . You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?’” The reference seems insignificant in isolation, but in the context of George’s warning Lennie that Curley’s wife is “‘a rat-trap if I ever seen one,’” it elevates sensitivity to the trap of racial discrimination that imprisons Crooks. Given the title of the novel, George’s comment about a “rat-trap” also brings to mind Burns’ couplet, “‘The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/Gang aft a-gley,’” and its implication that destiny, chance, is a trap set for men, mice, and perhaps rats too. *Of Mice and Men* is as much concerned with references to “chance,” often in connection with games, as it is with traps. George’s “rat-trap” comment also shows how rhetorical and natural threats coincide in *Of Mice and Men*. Women, and by extension human sexuality, are a biological trap for Steinbeck’s characters. The Salinas bordello’s trap men’s money and sap their will power. Steinbeck perhaps intended an oblique disparagement of Lennie’s Aunt Clara when he bestowed the name Clara on the more expensive of the town’s two madams. References to Curley’s “glove fulla vaseline” disagreeably symbolize the entrapment of husband and wife in mutual sexual exploitation. These references supplement Candy’s loss of his hand, prepare the ground for the crushing of Curley’s hand and, again by extension, show the meaning of Crook’s crippled spine. Crook’s infirmity is emblematic of his handicapped racial status, a brand of impotence cruelly thrust home by what Curley’s wife says to him.

Thus far, we have noticed historical factors that have influenced the reception of *Of Mice and Men*, and we have also seen that the novel clearly participates in the mainstream of historically important American fiction. The history of critical reactions to the book also deserves attention. The conclusions that critics have drawn about *Of Mice and Men* can best be summarized by quoting one of Steinbeck’s astutest readers, Peter Lisca, who accepts the lead of Antonia
Seixas in his finding that “the simple story of two migrant workers’ dream of a safe retreat, a ‘clean well-lighted place,’ becomes itself a pattern or archetypal which exists on three levels.”

“There is the obvious story level on a realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also the level of social protest, Steinbeck the reformer crying out against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, its interpretation limited only by the ingenuity of the audience.” Referring to Burns’ poem, Liscas goes on to identify a final, fourth level: “In the poem, Burns extends the mouse’s experience to include that of mankind; in Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human condition. ‘This is the way things are,’ both writers are saying. On this level, perhaps the most important, Steinbeck is dramatizing the non-teleological philosophy which had such a great part in shaping In Dubious Battle and which would be fully discussed in Sea of Cortez.” Liscas’s comments are definitive, and his chapter on Of Mice and Men in The Wide World of John Steinbeck is the indispensable point of departure for any survey of the novel’s critics.

The current explication has sought to show that the “inevitability” Liscas notices in Of Mice and Men is the effect of the novel’s rhetorical components, not just of the superficial course of events. Lennie’s actions repeat themselves with a regularity that soon becomes predictable, and Steinbeck similarly marshals his artistic resources to produce a cyclical, rather than linear dramatic action. In addition to the recurrent elements already discussed at some length, the reader will probably have recognized several others in the synopsis and in the novel itself. Apparently minor details often serve to buttress the novel’s taut, interlocking arrangement. When George tells Lennie, “You ain’t gonna put nothing over on me,” his language forecasts the boss’s parting shot in the following section. The color red repeatedly signifies feminine allure. A great, mysterious fish, at home in the natural surroundings of the novel’s opening, ironically anticipates the desperate human “fish,” Curley and his wife, that Lennie maims and kills. Larger rhetorical units form patterns, too. The end of the novel recapitulates almost verbatim the description at the beginning, although by the end Steinbeck has progressively educated his audience about the symbolism of incidental detail. The unassailable dispensation with which a water bird swallows a snake throws in starkest contrast George’s agonized resignation to Lennie’s death. Less overtly, the series of references to the characters’ literary tastes draws attention to the much greater capability and complexity of Steinbeck’s own. Even the mechanical procedure of noting the length of the novel’s six sections illuminates Steinbeck’s self-conscious artistry. The initial sections expand at a measured tempo into the spacious central episodes; then follows the compression and acceleration that leads to the denouement.

In closing, it is worthwhile reemphasizing an issue raised in the introduction: in every way, Of Mice and Men reflects Steinbeck’s exceptional concern for the implications of his craft at the time he wrote the novel. The novel arbitrates between an urgent need for freedom and a no less importunate need for control, personal needs that appertain more to the universal history of artists than to the passing history of the mid-1930s. Steinbeck’s characters are equally engrossed in the private dilemmas and decisions common to untutored creativity in every age. George has the faculty of creating dream worlds that seem real as long as he can improvise an audience. With Lennie’s death, he falls from grace. Recognizing that his audience, like his fable, has been ephemeral, the captive of circumstances, he accommodates himself to a more mundane version of reality than the one he has made in his mind. The importance for any story teller of a suitable audience is a principal theme of the novel. Crooks cannot read without a companion; George cannot sustain his story without Lennie. In this respect, the end of Of Mice and Men seems purposefully equivocal. George has located a new audience in Slim, a man whose consummate elan and professional composure is the clearest surrogate for the finesse Steinbeck’s literary proficiency represents. Vicariously, George is compensated for Lennie’s loss by participating in the special amalgam of stylistic ingenuity and compassionate sensibility, the blend of pragmatism and idealism, that Steinbeck displays at his very best. Unlike the ending of Tortilla Flat when, after the death of Danny, “no two walked together,” George is not alone. But unlike the ending, too, of the opening section of Of Mice and Men, when “a coyote yammered, and a dog answered from the other side of the stream,” Lennie has gone “across the river,” but the final question, “‘Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?’” remains unanswered. Steinbeck had won an audience, but its understanding was not necessarily proportionate to its size.

In retrospect, it may turn out that our own times will prove Steinbeck’s apprehensions groundless. Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood, the book in which Capote
returned from esoteric fiction to journalistic verismilitude and a revived interest in men violently incompatible with the institutionalized regimens of twentieth-century America, offers recent testimony that Steinbeck’s artistic and philosophical assumptions possess hitherto unsuspected durability. Capote’s real-life protagonists, Hickock and Smith, as they wander through the Southwest, resemble literary migrants from the American past more than atrocious murderers; like Lennie’s death, their execution draws a curtain on sadly depleted American dreams as well as personal ones, and leaves the reader with little recourse other than protest as futile as it is strident, or existential acceptance of a bleak modern panorama. But with the same tension evident at the end of Steinbeck’s book, Capote’s pyrrhic victory in the abolition of capital punishment is poised against the apocalyptic visions of personal liberty proposed, however tentatively, in Of Mice and Men, visions that the more outspoken of our contemporary voices have reaffirmed: “As dawn began to break I lay flat on my back in the lawn of the town square and kept saying over and over again, ‘You won’t tell what he did up in Weed, will you?’ What’d he do up in Weed? You won’t tell will you? What’d he do up in Weed?. This was from the picture Of Mice and Men, with Burgess Meredith talking to the foreman of the ranch.”

Sal Paradise and his various literary descendants obstinately refuse to abandon hope in George and Lennie’s dream, any more than his creator, Jack Kerouac, abandoned Steinbeck’s protean gestures of stylistic freedom.

Notes

5. Gannett, p. 30.
7. Lawrence, p. 62.
8. Ibid., p. 63.
11. Ibid., p. 11.
14. Lisca, pp. 138-139.
15. Ibid., pp. 139-140.

Samuel I. Bellman (essay date November 1975)


[In the following essay, Bellman explores, through a study of Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck’s recurring use of a “closed energy system” in which the negativity of emotional loss is inevitably but partially modified by the positiveness of personal gain—a narrative tool that showcases (particularly in Of Mice and Men) an ironic contradiction between the forces of control and freedom.]

The sensitive reader re-reading John Steinbeck’s deceptively simple adventure story just bordering on the social protest novel, Of Mice and Men (1937), may be forced to alter his assumptions about Steinbeck’s view of the orderliness of life and the ‘fitness’ of things. Here I do not wish to open the bothersome issue of Steinbeck’s ‘non-teleological thinking,’ discussed in chapter fourteen of The Log from The Sea of Cortez (1951): getting at the what or the how of the situation, instead of the why. Steinbeck is more accessible to the general reader when he leaves such mind-bending matters as epistemology and ontology to the philosophers and ‘tells it like it is’ or at least ‘like he sees it.’

‘Like he sees it’ is often taken to mean (thanks to Edmund Wilson’s pioneering essay in his 1941 collection, The Boys in the Back Room) a reduction of human and societal endeavor to animal-survival terms. But there is something deeper at work in Steinbeck’s fiction: the suggestion of a closed energy system, and an automatic regulation of that energy. Gain something here, lose something there (consider Hem-
ingway’s World Series analogy, which went something like this: win in Chicago, lose in Detroit), balancing the books before the final curtain drops. Compare what happens in The Pearl, at the end of The Grapes of Wrath, and at the end of Burning Bright: tragic loss (or a sense of tragic loss) followed by a qualified compensation.

Yet Steinbeck’s fiction also conveys the idea that something more than energy balance (energy being neither created nor destroyed) is involved. In other words, the amount of available energy—i.e., available opportunity for joy, productive action, self-fulfillment in a deep sense—is steadily diminishing. Thermodynamic entropy. Social systems or groups break down, even “nations of two” (in Kurt Vonnegut’s wonderful phrase) . . . the light of original happiness or of trusting hope eventually dims.

Applying this notion of Steinbeck’s pessimistic energy-system scheme (things are running down, but loss will bring a kind of replacement) to Of Mice and Men reveals an interesting paradox having to do with freedom and control. First we will have to recap the story briefly, accenting certain psychological features. The scene is a ranch near Soledad, California, and the two chief characters are a pair of itinerant farm workers, George (the responsible one, who makes the decisions and lays the plans) and Lennie (the retarded and irresponsible one, whom George will always have to take care of). In a sense, George and Lennie are to each other as ego is to id in the same mind: the conscious, reality-sensitive regulator always having to keep in check the primitive, violent instincts.

The crux of this story about the best laid plans of mice and men often going awry is the dilemma George faces after Lennie accidentally kills the boss’s daughter-in-law. The aroused ranch hands, led by Curley (the dead woman’s husband) run out to find Lennie and shoot him. George, who has stolen a gun from one of the men, gets to Lennie first. The two have a heart-to-heart talk, reiterating (each on his own level) their hopes and problems. It is as though a human mind were having a dialogue with itself, matching one viewpoint with another or, let us say, ego with id. George feels he will have to kill Lennie to spare his being killed (and, we suspect, being worked over, first) by the others. But it is hard for George to pull the trigger and yet even harder for him not to, which would mean exposing Lennie to a brutal murder by the gang. Finally, after a real heart-to-heart talk, George manages to shoot the unsuspecting, eternally repentant and hopeful Lennie.

So suspenseful and yet painful is the conclusion to the tale that the reader may easily miss a number of peculiar implications. First, George was a “whole” person only so long as he was tied up to Lennie, looking out for him, denying himself all the pleasures of the senses so he could save his money and they could buy a place of their own. It was the unusual buddy-ship of the two, the story makes clear, that rendered possible a glorious dream of self-improvement, a constructive hope to live by. But their dream of a place of their own was shattered after Lennie killed the woman. The kind of self-improvement held up as an ideal in the story was possible neither through the buddy-ship of George and Lennie nor through George’s going it alone.

Second, George came to feel that he had to kill Lennie for Lennie’s own good. And with Lennie dead, George could raise all the hell he had wanted to before but had been prevented (ostensibly by Lennie) from doing. Third, Lennie, as an id-figure, had actually exercised a restraining, inhibiting effect on George: the effect of the super-ego, the restrictions of society. But with Lennie dead, George was apparently about to become an id-figure himself, giving free rein to his “lower” desires and impulses. However, there is one more implication that cannot be overlooked: the matter of Authority.

After he discovered the dead woman George was unable to make up his mind as to what to do with Lennie. What really persuaded George to kill Lennie—it is as though he required official sanction for the unlawful act—is a real Authority figure, a man with “calm, Godlike eyes.” This is Slim, “a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch . . .”. Slim “moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. . . . There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. . . . His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.” (The 1963 Viking Press edition of The Short Novels of John Steinbeck, pp. 228, 224)

Not only did Slim talk George into killing Lennie, but he reassured him afterward that he had had to do it. And then he led George away so that they could go and have a drink somewhere. As if to clarify his subtle point about George now being linked closely to another regulatory force—the mysteriously powerful Slim instead of the simplemindedly powerful Len-
nie—Steinbeck has one of the men, at the close of the novel, inquire naively: “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” (Ibid., p. 272)

So, in a sense, George is still dependent on some superior force, still “innocent” (in his fashion) of the experience of adult freedom, still an id-figure (ironically enough, considering Lennie’s id qualities) to be kept under control (by Slim this time). The point Steinbeck seems to be making, as he rings down the curtain, is this. The individual may get rid of part of the self, for whatever reason, in whatever way (rejecting it, talking it out, shooting it out, etc.). But something else—a prosthetic device, so to speak—will be put right back in to take its place. And things will never be as good as they were before. What appears to be a newly gained freedom not only brings sadness, it brings return of control as well.

Joseph Millichap (essay date summer 1978)


[In the following essay, Millichap contrasts Lewis Milestone’s 1939 film version of Of Mice and Men with Steinbeck’s novel in a study comparing how realism is presented in film and fiction, respectively.]

A comparison of serious American fiction and film reveals that John Steinbeck has proved the most cinematically adaptable of our major novelists. At least two great films have been adapted from Steinbeck’s fiction—Lewis Milestone’s Of Mice and Men (1939) and John Ford’s The Grapes of Wrath (1940)—while two other films—Milestone’s The Red Pony (1949) and Elia Kazan’s East of Eden (1955)—are at least very good.1 It can be demonstrated that Steinbeck’s novels possess qualities which make them inherently adaptable for the screen; his individualized characters, strong narrative lines, and colorful settings are all as valuable in the film as they are in fiction. Yet more subtle considerations of style, mode, and medium yield greater insights into the filmic adaptability of Steinbeck’s fiction, particularly when attention is focused on the chronological pattern of these adaptations. The two great films were made from Steinbeck’s most realistic novels at the high point of American cinematic realism in the years just prior to World War Two; thus the convergence of literary and cinematic mode and style occasioned the successful screen adaptations of Steinbeck’s fiction to the film medium. This paper will consider the styles of fic-


tional and filmic realism as exemplified in Steinbeck’s and Milestone’s Of Mice and Men in order to elucidate both works, and to extend critical discussion of literary and cinematic styles.

None of the scholarship on film realism has utilized the recent work on American fictional Realism which rejects the traditional simplifications about common matter, liberal ideas, and journalistic style as characteristic of the mode, and substitutes definitions based on the stylistic devices of Realism. In particular, the works of George Becker, Donald Pizer, and Harold Kolb on American literary Realism have created new criteria which render earlier generalizations about Realism suspect as untested clichés.3 For example, Professor Kolb proceeds to define the mode of Realism by topical, but not necessarily “ordinary” matter, by an ethical and liberal, though unidealized, philosophical overview, and by a characteristic style. This Realistic style is marked by anti-omniscience, by complexity and ambiguity, by concern for character over action, and imagery over symbolism.

Although he does not mention Steinbeck specifically, Professor Kolb’s definitions obviously describe in a general sense the matter, the manner, and the method employed in Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck’s short novel and the stage version which he wrote from it present not only a contemporary but a common topic of the Thirties—the lives and deaths of little people disoriented and dispossessed by the conditions of the modern world. The book’s accurate and dispassionate portrait of agricultural life in California during the Depression prefigures Steinbeck’s next novel, The Grapes of Wrath.

The characters, especially Lennie, seem almost animal-like in their simplicity, but Steinbeck is careful to portray lives shaped by ethical as well as natural forces. Lennie cannot control his natural impulses and dies like a hunted animal, while Slim, who controls his passions as expertly as his mule team, lives on as the aristocrat of merit, providing what leadership and order are found in the ranch world. George exists somewhere between these poles, dreaming of order and harmony on “a little place” while still desiring the easy pleasures of pool hall, barroom, and brothel. Thus, behavior is motivated by the whole spectrum of human involvements with society as well as with nature, and social morality is as much a theme in Of Mice and Men as it is in The Grapes of Wrath.

Steinbeck’s stylistic techniques are realistic within Professor Kolb’s definitions of realistic style. Al-
though the point-of-view is third person, it is an objective, carefully distanced viewpoint, as dispassionate as the camera lens:

Evening of a hot day started the little wind to moving among the leaves. The shade climbed up the hills toward the top. On the sand banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray, sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilleted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the path and came into the opening by the green pool.

Steinbeck seems almost to be anticipating a film version of the book in his descriptive, documentary prose. The same vision is maintained throughout the short novel. Each chapter is introduced by a detailed report of the setting and then dialogue is simply recorded with no authorial directions. This methodology increases both the complexity and the ambiguity of the work because the reader is forced to interpret the characters for himself without the benefit of editorial judgment. Neither does Steinbeck comment on his characters through symbol or symbolic action. Although Lennie is depicted through images of rabbits, mice, and birds, he is not an animal; he is to some undetermined extent a responsible human being; and he must live in society as such or be destroyed. Thus, the anti-omniscience of viewpoint and imagery increases the complexity and ambiguity of characterization, placing Of Mice and Men solidly in the tradition of literary Realism.

Professor Kolb's definitions also create an interesting theoretical perspective for viewing cinematic realism and works within this mode such as Milestone's Of Mice and Men. Obviously, historical analogies are not precise because the technological development of film was necessary to portray realism on the screen. Primitive photographic apparatus, monochromatic film, and poor lighting could produce only a flickering simulacrum of real life on the early screen. Most importantly of all, sound was necessary for film to recreate experience realistically; indeed, it is impossible to conceive of the silent film as ever being essentially realistic. In a sense, sound added a whole new dimension to the medium, a dimension which transformed the stylized, often flat depiction of the silent screen into a more fully rounded representation of reality. A development of this magnitude could not help but influence every aspect of film technique.

Quite logically, editing became less important, indeed almost invisible, as cuts were now made in terms of natural movements. Editing was also simplified by the extended shot which could be held indefinitely while characters moved in front of the camera. When the possibilities of the extended shot were further increased by the development of deep-focus photography, the major directors adapted it to the depiction of the particular purposes of their films. Deep focus, effective lighting, and color film all contributed to the concept of mise en scène composition, the careful arrangement of picture and action to provide the full context of an event.

The contextual style produced from the combination of these technical developments demonstrates obvious affinities to the elements of Realistic literary style schematized by Professor Kolb. First, this filmic style is strongly anti-omniscient. Instead of selecting the pieces of reality which will guide the viewer's reaction to a situation, as in the expressionistic devices of close-up or montage, an essentially metaphoric style, the realistic film metonymically presents all the pieces of the situation much as in life, and allows the viewer to make his own selection. A corollary technique involves camera angle itself; realistic film often maintains a nearly level angle presenting a human perspective of the developing scene. The framing is as open as possible, the composition detailed and undramatic, the lighting natural, most often bright or clear. The editing, with its extended takes, also presents the viewer with a more objective view of reality.

Milestone's film version parallels Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men in its anti-omniscient viewpoint. His camera angles from prologue to epilogue, are always at eye level, thus involving the viewer much as he would be involved by watching the action unfold in life. The director's framing, especially in the outdoor scenes, opens wide vistas of natural and social contexts for the immediate action. His composition, though careful, is also detailed and complicated; the bunkhouse and barn interiors exemplify this method in the contextual details of social and animal life—pin-ups, bunks, harness, etc. Even within the bunkhouse or the stables at night the light of oil lamps is bright and clear enough to illuminate the nuances of relationships, as in the shooting of Candy's dog. His editing utilizes long takes from George and Lenny's first conversation.

This depiction of reality becomes more ambiguous as it becomes less omniscient; the viewer is left to form his own interpretation, rather than have it shaped by
the selective techniques of the director. All of the elements of picture—framing, composition, and lighting—increase the complexity of the film image, and even editing, though less apparent, becomes more devious in its attempt to conceal its operations. Invisible editing must, in one sense at least, be more difficult than the obvious juxtaposition of images. Realistic scenes are generally longer and contain more disparate elements than the shorter, quicker sequences of silent or expressionistic film. Therefore, in every element of cinematic style, realism increases the ambiguity and complexity of the film vision.

The obvious juxtaposition of images in montage editing also heightens the symbolic function of the objects contrasted. A quick cut from a character to an animal will tend metaphorically to connect the two; the realistic presentation of character and animal together in deep shots and through extended scenes will also connect the two, but more in terms of metonymy. Often, these connections will develop into less emphatic, though meaningful patterns of images. Lenny’s wee animals will serve as an example: Milestone consistently introduces rabbits, birds, puppies within a total context and without drawing symbolic attention to them by close-up or montage editing.

Professor Kolb’s other element of realistic style, emphasis on character above action, is more difficult to adapt to filmic terms. In a general sense, realistic films are obviously less epic, less melodramatic, less frenetic than silent films. But in comparison with more recent expressionistic, surrealistic, or symbolic films, does this generalization really hold true? In a sense, the ground of discussion must be shifted at this point to the larger characteristics of Realism—subject matter and philosophical outlook. Realism does tend to look at more ordinary, more common, more “average” characters, characters caught up in more topical and mundane situations and events. These characters will be carefully depicted because they are capable of ethical choices which will shape their fate. Thus, the depiction of the full complexity of character becomes more important than the exaggeration of one psychological trait, symbolic characteristic, or idea about human behavior.

In the historical development of American film realism during the Thirties these universal tendencies of the mode were reinforced by the social problems of the Depression, as well as by the business trends of the film industry. The alienation of the unemployed and the dispossessed created a liberal response in all the arts. Literature, film, theatre, painting, and music all sought to focus on the common (often the “mass”) man and his situation. The critical canons in all these forms emphasized a Realistic response to the problems of the poor and the downtrodden. At the same moment, the uncommon men and women of Hollywood were becoming exalted and rich through the establishment of their personalities as role models for the same masses. The star system solidified certain personalities into a reality more palpable than the worlds of politics, sports, or social action. Stars thus played themselves or variations of themselves, establishing the exhibition of their characters, or even characteristics, as the purpose of filmed narrative. The convergence of all these tendencies—technical, social, and business—produced the great period of American cinematic realism, roughly between the early Thirties and World War II.

Lewis Milestone’s adaptation of Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men came at the high tide of this period, and for many reasons the film represents a very successful small scale combination of realistic tendencies in literature and film. First, Milestone was presented with a fine literary vehicle in both Steinbeck’s fictional work and in the Broadway adaptation, where Steinbeck (with the help of George S. Kaufman) had tightened the novel considerably. Second, Milestone had at his disposal the highly polished technique of cinema realism perfected over the decade of sound production which included many of his own films. In using these techniques Milestone was able to find the graphic equivalents for the poetry of Steinbeck’s patterned language. Third, the Hollywood production system provided Milestone with able assistance in Eugene Solow’s scripting, Norbert Brodine’s photography, Aaron Copland’s music, and the acting of Burgess Meredith, Lon Chaney, Jr., and Charles Bickford.

Milestone opens with a prologue before the credits, a device not common at that time, and one which establishes the serious intentions of the film. The audience sees the drama of a realistic situation, rather than the details of Hollywood production. More importantly, the prologue sets mood and tone while establishing themes and motifs which will be continued throughout the film. Steinbeck preserves a greater dramatic unity by opening and closing his narrative at the narrow pool, but Milestone achieves a greater dramatic force by translating George’s remarks about the trouble at Weed into an exciting chase sequence. The prologue also works toward increased realism as it extends the action of the narrative from the small world of the ranch to a larger world of Weed and the Salinas Valley country, and finally, by the implica-
tions of the hobos on the train, to all of Depression-
stricken America.

The opening shot establishes the nature-man-society balance which will become thematically important throughout; as the music rises dramatically, swirling stormy clouds darken the sky. After studying the sky, the camera looks down from eye level to examine a rabbit and a flock of quail. The inhabitants of this natural world feed peacefully until human legs intrude into the frame; as the camera pulls up to eye level, the audience sees George and Lennie running wildly. Several quick cuts of the pursuing posse and their quarry capture the excitement of the chase, while in the background the thunder rolls and Coup-land’s music swells. Trapped like rabbits, the pair begin to panic until George leads them into an irrigation ditch; this immersion is accompanied by a cloudburst which evidently discourages the hunters, who have leaped across the ditch without discovering their prey. The emotional mood of the film (fear, frustration, hate), characterization (George as the leader, Lennie the follower), style (eye-level shots, careful framing in outdoor scenes), and theme (the relationship of human and animal worlds) are all established.

The next scene consists of one long, panning shot which shows George and Lennie still running, now at night, to catch a moving freight train. When they climb into an open boxcar, George closes the door, and against this background the credits are presented. After the credits the train fades into the distance, and the next sequence is in the interior of a bus; the other passengers are scanned as the camera settles down for an extended take of George and Lennie in the front seat talking about their new jobs at the ranch. Again this sequence is added by Milestone, made up from a few retrospective remarks by George, and again it works to open up the context of the action. The bus is full of other ranch hands like George and Lennie, and the bus driver remembers taking them to Weed. George becomes angry and defensive at the bus driver’s remarks, creating a confrontation, after which the driver puts the pair off to walk the rest of the way to the ranch. After several miles of hot pavement, George hurls a clod of earth at a signboard depicting a business man enjoying the comfort of an air-conditioned train, a life style in easy contrast to his various modes of transportation.

The next sequence presents Chapter One of the novel or Act One, Scene One, of the play. George and Lennie stop to rest beside a narrow pool of the Salinas River, and George decides to spend the night there enjoying their last freedom before their new job. Milestone’s version stays very close to the dialogue of the play, and his filmic style develops a similar sense of intimate realism. After filming the pair approach from a slight distance, the camera moves in like another person joining their conversation. Many of the cuts are held for long periods as both men are balanced in the frame; about the only cutting in the scene is from one speaker to another. In fact, editing becomes nearly invisible; it does not, for example, focus on Lennie’s dead bird (a mouse in the novel) as a symbol, but only as a part of a developing pattern of nature images within the context of the entire Lennie-George relationship.

Milestone does add one piece of dialogue to the scene; the last thing George says before they sleep is that “A man sure feels free when he ain’t got a job . . . and when he ain’t hungry.” Their arrival at the ranch the next day proves the wisdom of these words. The boss is mad because they have missed a half-day’s work, and he makes it plain that working on this ranch will be no picnic. In handling the interview with the boss before the arrival at the bunkhouse, Milestone reverses Steinbeck’s order of events, though each event is substantially reproduced. This method seems to work better by providing a greater contrast of life in nature and life in society. These greater complexities of social life are mirrored in the increasing use of deep focus and in the greater detail of mise en scène composition. The scene opens as Candy, the aging bunkhouse swamper, leads George and Lennie across the ranch yard toward the boss’s office; they are seen through the open window of the office and in the context of the cluttered desk and files. As they enter, the camera examines all the details of the interior, which is perfectly arranged to present the complicated hierarchy of the ranch as a business society. During the interview Milestone holds very extended shots on the carefully composed grouping of the four figures, with dramatic emphasis provided by shifting of the figures in front of the camera (the boss rises from his chair, Candy shuffles, Lennie cowers, George puffs himself up defensively) instead of by camera movement or cutting.

Steinbeck used a sort of verbal mise en scène in the depiction of the bunkhouse. Milestone picks up this cue and translates this picture perfectly to film. He has his camera at eye level, inside the door, ready to follow the trio through the room and to locate them against all of the details Steinbeck mentions, while adding a few, such as girlie pictures tacked to the walls. George’s argument with Candy about the pos-
sibility of bed bugs is neatly framed by two stacks of bunks and again done in an extended shot. In both novel and play Steinbeck brings the other characters into the bunkhouse, including the boss for the interview. Milestone has the other characters presented outside, in the office, or against the natural backgrounds of ranch activity. Crooks, the black cripple who serves as stablebuck, limps by; Curly, the boss’ son, rides up on a movie cowboy’s white horse; Mae, Curly’s wife, is playing in the barn with her fleecy puppy; Slim, the muleskinner, is first seen behind his twelve-mule team. Milestone also builds more tension by inventing a first fight between Curly and Whit, a young ranch hand, then moving to direct confrontations of Curly with Slim, George, and Lenny. Although his movement seems a little plotty in comparison with the novel, it works nicely here to widen the contexts of animal and natural images.

Milestone very carefully orchestrates these scenes in terms of composition. Mountains, barley fields, and farm machinery are balanced to emphasize the movement of characters. Curly advances through the moving belts of the threshing machines; Mae peeks out from between the wagons at Slim; George has Lenny lift a wagon on his back in a demonstration of his superhuman strength. In the movements between each of these confrontations Milestone draws back for distant shots which locate the characters in the full context of the ranch and the natural world. Even here he holds the shots and lets the action play in front of the camera; farm wagons criss-cross in right-left, left-right lines of movement—a sort of ballet which gives a lively feeling to the bucolic life. Against this backdrop we see Lennie’s brute strength, Mae’s lust, and Curly’s brutality; only Slim, the muleskinner, and to some extent, his new friend George know how to harness nature in an orderly way.

Milestone uses the wagons’ moving in at dinner time as a transitional device to several scenes which bridge the gap between afternoon and evening in the novel and the play. Instead of George and Slim talking in the bunkhouse, they hold their conversation while riding in, washing up, eating dinner. These scenes allow Milestone to do some nice mise en scène composition with visual elements like the sinewy bodies of the ranchhands in the outdoor washhouse and the heaping piles of plain food on the tables of the cookshack. He also interpolates a contrasting dinner scene at the ranchhouse, where the boss and Curly hog down their food as Mae simmers in silence. Finally she pulls a movie advertisement from her dress and asks Curly to take her to the show, but he wolves down the rest of his pie and saunters out, throwing back the excuse that he has seen the picture with the “boys.” Mae is left behind with the indifference of her father-in-law and the antagonism of the Chinese cook.

In contrast, the dinner conversation in the cookshack is voluble and pleasant, and the friendliness continues in a game of horseshoes during the early evening. The men of the bunkhouse, for all their disparate qualities, form a more cohesive society than the family of the ranchhouse. The long sequence which forms Chapter Three of the novel and Act Two, Scene Two of the play, the shooting of Candy’s dog, demonstrates this human solidarity. Carlson, a seasoned ranchhand who seems second in command to Slim, has been after Candy to get rid of his old sheepdog because it smells up the bunkhouse. All the men commiserate with Candy, as almost all of them have dogs of their own, but finally they all agree that Candy would do better to shoot the old dog and take a pup from the litter Slim’s bitch has just dropped. When Candy cannot bring himself to do it, Carlson volunteers to shoot the dog with his pistol. Milestone handles the potentially melodramatic scene with a fine restraint, using the devices of cinematic realism to limit the sentiment inherent in the subject (though the musical background is somewhat overdone). The scene unfolds within the mise en scène earlier established in the bunkhouse, playing itself out in extended shots of the whole group debating the fate of Candy’s dog. Many of these shots are angled through the bunks or other bits of furniture, giving a fuller context to the drama pictured. Only when Candy hears Carlson’s shot does the camera close up on him isolated in his bunk. Of course, the scene requires this extended treatment because it prefigures Lennie’s death at the conclusion of the film.

Lennie is not present in the bunkhouse; rather he is out in the barn playing with the pup Slim has given him. Milestone cuts back to the ranchhouse to show Mae alone, pacing and brooding; when she flips on the radio, the raucous swing music contrasts with Copland’s quiet background score in the bunkhouse scene. The radio irritates Mac’s father-in-law, so she decides to visit her puppy in the barn. Slim and Crooks have also headed to the barn to look after the mules, and she takes the opportunity to talk to Slim about why he absolutely rejects her (another scene invented by Milestone), but Curly, who is always checking on her movements, uses their proximity and the gift of the puppy to start another confrontation.
The resulting fracas leaves George and Lennie together in the bunkhouse, where they can discuss their plans. They are not alone, though, for Candy is still quietly curled up in his bunk. When George begins another description of their little place, the camera holds on him and Lennie for a full five minutes; slowly, in the far background shadows, Candy changes his position as he hears their plans for the little place. Then he gets up and crosses the room, filling the opening between George and Lennie. Hesitantly, he asks to be included in their plans; now alone without his old dog, he must have some companionship. As he tells George that otherwise he faces only the county home, the camera moves to a closeup of his broken face and then, through more ordinary cutting back and forth, unfolds their debate. Candy has $340 to contribute toward the purchase of the ranch. George climbs into his upper bunk to think the proposition over; the camera now looks over his shoulder down at the expectant Lennie and the hopeful Candy. Suddenly George jumps down; he will do it. They almost dance between the stacks of bunks, while the camera holds all three yelling out their contributions and desires. Overall, the whole sequence is a splendid example of how cinematic style can evoke the full power of dramatic performances.

The next sequence, Lennie’s fight with Curly, begins with extended shots of the group returning to the bunkhouse; Slim verbally puts down Curly, and then Carlson does the same. In his frustration Curly turns on Lennie, and Milestone uses his quickest cutting and most dramatic montage effects to achieve the sense of physical urgency the scene requires. The cuts jump from one combatant to the other, and to the circle of ranchhands urging Lennie to defend himself. Finally the badgered giant catches one of Curly’s fists in his big paw and slowly crushes it. The camera holds a long closeup on the fist, and Copland’s music also rises to a crescendo. Fortunately, Slim is able to browbeat Curly into covering up the fight, saving Lennie’s job.

Milestone interpolates the next scene—Saturday night in the town barroom. Not only does it give him the opportunity for another realistic mise en scène composition, but it again extends the contexts of the central narrative. George is tempted by booze and floozies, but he maintains his balance, has one beer, and mails a money order off to make a down payment on the little farm. Almost the whole sequence is shot from directly beside the booth where George, Whit, and Carlson sit with three good-time girls. This set-up also allows Milestone to re-emphasize one motif, the tawdry dreams of Hollywood; the girls introduce themselves as Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow, and Greta Garbo; “Garbo” even camps, “I want to be alone.”

The real Greta Garbo’s publicity-oriented aloofness is in direct contrast with the realistic loneliness of Steinbeck’s characters. One of the most lonely, Crooks, the black stablebuck, is featured in the next sequence, when Lennie, finally tiring of his pup, visits his room in the barn. At first Crooks refuses to let him in, because he is refused admittance to the segregated bunkhouse. But Lennie’s innocence encourages Crook’s trust, and this human contact opens him up to Candy also. Soon Crooks is also in on the “little place” plan; when George returns from town all three are drinking, smoking, and singing. Crook’s room, actually the harness room of the barn, gives Milestone another carefully detailed setting that carries symbolic overtones. As Crooks himself says, he has his own room, but also his own dung heap. The whole sequence is shot much in the same style as the bunkhouse scenes, and when Mae intrudes once more, Milestone has the opportunity to do some nice choreography with his figures before the camera.

Unfortunately, the boss finds Mae with the men and tells Curly when he returns from town; Curly, unable to start a fight, throws her out the next morning. Milestone adds this scene between Mae and Curly, and it works very well in terms of motivating Mae’s subsequent behavior toward Lennie. When she goes to the barn to retrieve her pet, she finds Lennie mourning over his puppy, the pup having gone the way of his mice and birds. Mae wants any sort of human response, and she begins to flirt with Lennie. Steinbeck sets the scene in the barn with its naturalistic implications; Milestone cinematically realizes them by photographing against this realistic backdrop and by viewing his characters through the perspectives of rails and pens and hay bales. As Lennie and Mae talk, the camera does more close-up work than it has throughout the film. Each character is locked in his own dream—Lennie’s of the little place, Mae’s of Hollywood.

The murder itself is handled deftly and with considerable decorum. Originally Milestone had thought of having Mae killed by someone else in order to preserve audience sympathy for Lennie; Steinbeck, rightly, protested that such a move would dissipate the tragic inevitability of the conclusion. Quick cutting captures the physical tension of the scene, and the camera holds a long close-up on Mae’s shoes.
suspended a few inches above the ground by Lennie's iron grasp on her throat. Her left shoe dangles, then drops off, and a few seconds later Lennie lets her crumble to the barn floor.

In spite of her death, life goes on much as usual. After Lennie runs, Slim's bitch comes back to her pups; Candy comes in and picks one out to be his; George and Crooks play at horseshoes. Candy and George discover the crime as the dog comes to them carrying Mae's shoe in its mouth. George decides, with Slim's approval, that he must kill Lennie himself so that the lynch mob organized by Curly won't get a chance at him. This final sequence is reminiscent of the prologue and the first scene at the narrow pool in both action and treatment. George and Slim race to the pool and quickly find Lennie. Slim walks off as Milestone cross-cuts to the posse led by the Sheriff and to the mob led by Curly. The camera holds extended takes of George and Lennie as George delivers his traditional monologues; now as George describes the little place he has Lennie look across the narrow pool and imagine what it will be like. In a final act of human imagination Lennie does see the future that George so movingly presents. The camera holds on them together for several minutes and then follows George as he pulls back and takes the pistol from beneath his jacket. Like Carlson he is a careful shot; he fires once, and turns his head in horror at his act. Milestone has Lenny fall into the pool, once again immersing himself as he had in the prologue. The director also adds an epilogue in which Slim joins George, an act of supportive comradeship and George, at Slim's urging, surrenders the gun to the sheriff who has arrived with the posse.* Then, after they have walked off, Copland's theme music rises and a final shot holds on the same scene as the seasons change—leaves fall and a squirrel scrambles on the fallen tree where Lennie sat. Recalling the rabbit and quail of the prologue, the natural movement poetically states that Lennie has returned to the nature which he loved, leaving George to the greater complexities of human nature in its social organization.

An extended comparison of a novel and its film adaptation must inevitably end in an evaluation of the success of both. The excellent work of the cast, the creative contributions of the technical staff, and the director's thoughtful combination of these efforts into an extension of the novel's Realistic thrust, all combine to make Milestone's version even more powerful than Steinbeck's. This judgment is not made in a denigration of the novel; rather, it is a fine piece of fiction, but Milestone from it created an even finer film, a film which demonstrates the convergence of realistic fictional and cinematic styles.

Notes

1. I have not seen the Mexican film version of *The Pearl* (1947), but it is reputed to be an excellent film; Steinbeck worked on its screenplay, as well as on *The Red Pony*. Steinbeck's screenplay for Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) is one of his finest works; see Robert E. Morsberger's *Viking* edition (1975).


3. Page references are to the Bantam Pathfinder edition (New York, 1971), which is most widely available.


5. The opening is very reminiscent of the opening shot of Pare Lorentz' *The River* (1937), which had a wide influence on Hollywood directors of a serious bent.

6. Quotations from the film are taken from the final print; I have not seen a shooting script or screenplay.


8. George is not handcuffed as Andrew Sarris states in his essay "Toward a Theory of Film History" which prefaces *The American Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 20. Unless there were different endings, which I doubt, it appears Mr. Sarris has "disremembered."
Laurence W. Mazzeno (essay date 1990)


[In the following essay, Mazzeno focuses on Steinbeck’s treatment of the theme of personal responsibility, on his symbolic use of traps, and on the seeming inevitability of Lennie’s fate in Of Mice and Men.]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. He and his three sisters were raised by their parents in this small town in the Salinas Valley, a locale that figures prominently in much of the novelist’s work. Though he attended Stanford University intermittently from 1919 to 1925, he never graduated. In 1925 he left California for New York, where he worked for a time on the New York American. Eventually fired from his newspaper position and discouraged by his inability to sell any of his stories, Steinbeck returned to California and took up odd jobs while continuing to write fiction. After being rejected by seven publishers, Steinbeck’s first novel, Cup of Gold, was finally accepted in 1929. It was not a best seller, nor was his second, To a God Unknown (1933), but in the latter Steinbeck began writing about the area in which he had spent his boyhood. He continued that practice in his third novel, Tortilla Flat, which proved immensely popular and established him as a new voice in American fiction.

For the rest of the 1930s, Steinbeck focused his literary talents on the region around the Salinas Valley. A fortuitous combination of events assured Steinbeck’s success. The tragedy of the Great Depression gave him opportunity to unite the kind of vivid description that characterizes regional fiction with a sound understanding of universal human issues. In Dubious Battle, a novel about strike organizers among the fruit pickers in the valley, won the California Literature Gold Medal. Of Mice and Men continued his string of successes; Steinbeck turned the novella into a play, which won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. His greatest single achievement came when The Grapes of Wrath won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1939 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

During these pre-war years Steinbeck spent much of his time in California and wrote nonfiction as well as novels. When World War II erupted, he turned his talents to aiding the United States cause through some propagandistic writings and produced The Moon Is Down, a novel about the war in occupied Norway.

Steinbeck continued writing novels after the war; most were well received by the general public. In 1948 he was selected for membership in the most prestigious literary circle in the country, the American Academy of Arts and Letters. East of Eden (1952) was turned into a 1955 movie starring the most popular actor of the time, James Dean. Steinbeck himself wrote several screenplays and in 1962 published Travels with Charley in Search of America, a travelogue of his trip across the country with his dog, Charley. In that same year, he was selected as the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the highest international honor bestowed on living writers. He died in New York City on December 20, 1968.

Steinbeck is one of the few twentieth-century writers to achieve both popular success and critical acclaim. The measure of his stature in academic circles is illustrated by the substantial body of criticism available on his works: more than a dozen books, hundreds of articles, and a scholarly journal are devoted to studies of his writings. Many critics consider him one of the truly great writers of the century.

OVERVIEW

In a relatively short novel, Steinbeck is able to raise and discuss important human issues: the importance of friendship, the need for people to take responsibility for others less fortunate than themselves, the tragedy of circumstances interfering with people’s plans for the future, and the insensitivity of some people toward those of different racial background, social status, or intellectual prowess. These social issues are dramatized in a carefully plotted story that keeps the reader’s attention focused on the main characters, building to a violent climax in which the ethics of violent solutions to human problems are called into question.

SETTING

The action takes place in the 1930s on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California. The novel opens with the major characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, camping for the night beside a pool along the banks of the Salinas River. The following morning, the two hike to a nearby ranch, where they take up residence in the bunkhouse. Steinbeck paints a vivid picture of the sparsely equipped facility and of the
hot, dusty ranch land on which George and Lennie work. Several key scenes take place in the barn on the ranch; again Steinbeck evokes a feeling of the scene through his detailed description of the stalls, the tack for the horses, and the animals that inhabit the area. The novel closes at the same point at which it opens, in the grove of trees beside the pool.

**THEMES AND CHARACTERS**

This short novel allows Steinbeck to focus his attention on one of the oldest issues in human relations: people’s responsibility for other people. George is saddled with “half-witted” Lennie, who depends on him to serve as both intermediary and protector in almost all situations involving contact with others. This relationship is based not on any family bond, but on George’s belief that Lennie would die if not protected from others. The story of these two drifters highlights the universal plight of people in search of a better life. The dreams these two have—to own their own land, to be their own bosses, to control their own destiny—are common ones that virtually every reader shares. The novel dramatizes the tragedy of frustrated hopes, suggesting that fate inevitably crushes people’s aspirations, no matter how carefully they plan to overcome obstacles to their happiness.

As one might expect in such a short work, there is little character development in the novel. Steinbeck concentrates on revealing his characters and presenting them as sympathetic or unsympathetic to focus the reader’s attention on their plight. The chief characters in the novel are from the lowest social class in the West; both George and Lennie are homeless, with few financial resources and only an unbounded degree of physical energy and undaunted imagination to compensate for their plight. George is cunning to a point, but one gets the sense that he knows he is only fooling both himself and Lennie in conjuring up schemes to buy a ranch where the two of them will settle down to raise crops and livestock. Lennie is mentally incapacitated in that he has trouble understanding complex social situations and is able to remember only selected information. The dream of living on his own place has stuck in his imagination, however, and he believes wholeheartedly in George’s ability to make that dream come true. As one might expect in such a short work, other characters are almost stereotypes: Slim, the knowledgeable, exceptionally capable, stoic ranch hand; Curley, the ranch owner’s diminutive son, who is intensely jealous of his wife and quick to pick fights to prove his prowess; and Curley’s wife, a flirtatious young woman convinced that she was destined for a more glamorous life than the one she leads on the isolated ranch. Steinbeck uses these stock characters effectively, however, to dramatize the tragedy that befalls George and Lennie.

**LITERARY QUALITIES**

Steinbeck highlights the plight of his characters through his skillful use of imagery. The novel is filled with references to traps and entrapment. The frequent use of animal imagery serves as a point of comparison for understanding the emotional states of the characters within the work. The effect of the climax is heightened by Steinbeck’s careful use of foreshadowing, especially in repeated scenes in which Lennie unintentionally mishandles various animals. The sense of impending doom for Lennie becomes particularly ominous in the opening paragraphs of the last chapter, when animals act out the savage and seemingly senseless struggle for survival just before George and Lennie meet for the last time by the Salinas River.

Steinbeck also makes effective use of literary allusion. The novel takes its title from Robert Burns’s eighteenth-century poem, “To a Mouse,” in which the narrator muses that “The best laid plans of mice and men / gang aft agley”—that is, often go astray. The little tragedy Burns notes in the destruction of a mouse’s home by the unwitting act of a farmer ploughing his fields is magnified in Steinbeck’s novel: where Burns focuses on the mouse, Steinbeck dramatizes the plight of men whose plans are destroyed by forces beyond their control. Hence, the novel shares several affinities with both classical and modern tragedies. In its cosmic irony it is akin to the works of nineteenth-century American naturalists, such as Frank Norris, and to the novels of British writer Thomas Hardy.

**SOCIAL SENSITIVITY**

*Of Mice and Men* is replete with matters of social concern. Its themes are overtly social, dealing with issues of people’s responsibility for others. Steinbeck is intent on getting his readers to see that humans cannot be isolated from others, nor can they ignore the plight of the less fortunate.

The treatment of the two main characters, George and Lennie, evokes an atmosphere of pathos that nudges the reader to judge their behavior sympathetically. Such an attitude, however, can easily lead one to condone certain actions that are questionable at best. One must distinguish carefully be-
tween attitudes and actions in this work, for there is an exceptional amount of physical violence presented here, and a suggestion that such violence is part of the way things happen in the world. Several animals meet their deaths either through accident or as a result of the natural struggle for survival; when Lennie kills his puppy, for example, the reader is apt to focus on the protagonist’s sorrow and overlook the fact that Lennie is a danger to other creatures—both animals and humans—because his brute strength is not reined in by a competent intellect. Even the accidental death of Curley’s wife at Lennie’s hands can easily be misread: the reader may become caught up in worrying about how Lennie will escape or what George will do to save him, rather than realize the horror that should be felt in knowing that, through Lennie’s actions, a human life has been snuffed out. Steinbeck even challenges the reader to consider the possibility that mercy killing may be acceptable: certainly the final paragraphs of the novel suggest that George may have been right in taking Lennie’s life rather than letting him face the wrath of Curley and the gang bent on avenging the death of Curley’s wife. The importance, and the inevitability, of violence in people’s lives is an issue that cannot be overlooked in any discussion of this work.

John L. Marsden (essay date winter 1995)


[In the following essay, Marsden argues that despite not offering detailed narrative descriptions of either the types of work that would be involved in farming or the natural landscape of the region, Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men is intimately concerned with both elements, particularly in its recurring motif of Lennie’s and George’s hope to one day work the land of their own.]

In the most recent film of Of Mice and Men, the director, Gary Sinise, departs from Steinbeck’s short novel in two important ways: first, the film incorporates panoramic shots of the fertile California countryside and second, there are numerous shots of the “bindlestiffs” working on the land. Without seeking to criticize the film, which is beautifully made, I want to focus on the elements of the novel that these departures throw into relief. Despite the novel’s setting, the conquered western frontier never comes into view; similarly, the portrayal of the migrant fieldworkers does not extend to a description of the work itself in any detail. Initially, this may seem to be an evasion on Steinbeck’s part, given the more explicitly political nature of much of his previous work. As Paul McCarthy has pointed out, “Of Mice and Men and In Dubious Battle differ in that the former lacks widespread violence, class conflict and Marxian ideology” (57). However, while Of Mice and Men is marked by the absence of the open spaces of the frontier and the absence of labor, the novel is crucially concerned with both of these things, and with the complex political relationship between them.

This relationship between land, labor and capital is explored through the dream of freedom that absorbs first Lennie, then George, Candy and Crooks. According to Louis Owens, Steinbeck “saw no cornucopia of democracy in the retreating frontier, but rather a destructive and fatal illusion barring Americans from the realization of any profound knowledge of the continent they had crossed” (4). In Of Mice and Men, the dream of independence and self-sufficiency apparently upheld by the vast spaces of the western frontier does indeed turn out to be “destructive and fatal.” What remains unacknowledged, however, in Owens’ analysis, is that the closing of the frontier was a direct consequence of the need for a capital-based economy to impose order on and to control the open spaces of the West, and not, as Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis suggests, simply the result of population migration. The allocation of virtually all available land to railroad companies and a small number of wealthy farmers through a corrupt system of land grants, the extent of which is amply traced in Carey McWilliams’ Factories in the Fields, was the most significant factor in exhausting frontier space. The central irony of this development is that while capital “killed” the frontier, it also encouraged the prevailing frontier myth—that of individual freedom—in order to amass a labor force. The dream of independence described in Of Mice and Men directly conflicts with capitalist practices, as George, Lennie and the others discover.

The novel opens in what seems to be a fertile wilderness setting in which “the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green,” and in which rabbits, raccoons and deer all live among the “golden foothills” (1). However, it is soon apparent that this is not quite virgin landscape: a path has been worn by boys from a nearby ranch and by tramps, while in front of a sycamore limb that has been “worn smooth by men who have sat on it” there is “an ashpile made by many fires” (2). Even the tranquility of the scene is undermined by the fact that it offers only a brief respite on the journey between
two jobs. From here we move very quickly to the ranch—at least to the bunk house and the barn—where the bulk of the novel is set. The bunk house both symbolizes and underscores in a very literal way the migrant workers’ lack of space and freedom. It is a construction whose apparently simple functional purpose disguises its status as an instrument of control:

[The bunk house was] a long rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks. . . .

(19)

This spatial confinement forms more than an ironic contrast to the vast acres outside; it reinforces the economic, social and psychological constrictions on the workers.

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* examines the architecture of “discipline,” of which both the bunk house and the barn are examples. Since effective control of a large concentrated group is difficult to achieve solely by force (as Curley discovers in his attack on Lennie), observation provides, for Foucault, the key to controlling behavior in a more subtle and successful manner: “the exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation” (170). The ideal model for such coercion is Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, in which men are always subject to the gaze of the all-seeing eye of authority. Both the bunk house and Crook’s barn are panoptical structures: the “small square windows” of the bunk house, for example, are less suited to their ostensible purpose of lighting the interior than they are to allowing for the observation of what is taking place within. In both buildings, control is established by the authoritarian gaze of the boss and his son Curley. Suspicious of Lennie’s silence, the boss punctuates his departure from the bunk house with an arresting glance: “He turned abruptly and went to the door, but before he went out he turned and looked for a long moment at the two men.” George is immediately aware of the significance of the glance: “Now he’s got his eye on us” (25-26). A short time later, Candy’s description of the boss is disrupted by the entrance of Curley, who immediately fixes the men in his gaze: “He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. . . . [H]is glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. . . . Curley stared levelly at him” (28). On Curley’s departure, George turns to Candy for an explanation and, before replying, “the old man looked cautiously at the door to make sure nobody was listening” (28). Almost as soon as he begins to speak, Curley’s wife appears in the doorway, blocking out the sunlight. Such observation serves to place the characters in what Foucault calls “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201).

Foucault’s description of the function of observation cannot fully account for the internal divisions among the migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men*, or for the corresponding absence of a collective response. Peter Blau has suggested that “social values that legitimate opposition to dominant powers, and thereby solidify it, can emerge only in a collectivity whose members share the experience of being exploited and oppressed” (231). While the novel alludes to certain social distinctions—the boss “wore high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man” and Curley “like his father, . . . wore high-heeled boots” (23, 28)—there is little sign here of the class conflicts which so marked the birth of industrial capitalism in Europe. In fact, the migrant workers in the novel do not “share the experience of being exploited and oppressed” because as the West underwent a period of industrial expansion in which agriculture had become “large-scale, intensified, diversified, mechanized” (McWilliams 5), the notions of individual freedom and individual responsibility fostered by western expansion preempted a collective defense of migrant workers’ interests.

What distinguishes George and Lennie at the outset from the other more aimless and isolated workers is their shared dream of “a coupla acres.” The dream operates as a chorus in the novella, in terms of both its tone and the structure that its repetition defines. It is described on three occasions: first, in the opening scene, as a “pipe dream” that George uses to calm Lennie; then, in the middle of the novel, when it appears that there is a possibility of its realization; finally, near the end, where it functions as a requiem for Lennie. In each case, it is recited in religious tones, as if it were a sacred text: “George’s voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before” (15). The reaction that the vision provokes in George himself supports its apparently spiritual or other-worldly qualities: “he looked raptly at the wall. . . . [H]e sat entranced with his own picture” (64). This rapture, together with the pastoral vision that it invokes, has led critics such as Owens and Goldhurst to see the dream as an expression of a desire to return to Eden.
and a pre-lapsarian world. Owens, for example, suggests that the vision “represents a desire to defy the Curse of Cain and fall of man” (102), while Goldhurst traces a parallel between the migrant workers and Cain, neither of whom “possess or enjoy the fruits of [their] labor” (Benson 52).

Because it is so like a litany, however, there is the danger that what the dream actually describes will be overlooked in favor of its allegorical status. In fact, an analysis of its terms of reference suggests that the vision is, more than an invocation of some symbolic Eden, a direct reaction to the physical and psychological conditions imposed by capitalist practices; it is an expression of the desire for self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency. Initially, what is described is sketchy: George tells Lennie that they will “get a coupla acres an’ a cow and some pigs. . . . An’ when it rains in winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire in the stove and set around it” (15). Later, when the possibility of realizing their hopes seems closer, the description of “a coupla acres” and the comforts they will offer becomes more detailed, including a “kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches” as well as a “chicken run” and a “win’mill” (62). This vision is the quintessential “American Dream,” a dream founded, of course, on the notion that on the frontier anyone can find success. The dream reveals as much about the nature of power relations in an industrial system as it does about the simple desire for material success. The vision described by George is a reaction to what Foucault calls “biopower,” the exercise of which provides for the “subjugation of bodies and control of populations” (Rabinow 262) that a developing capitalist society needs to accomplish: “we’d just live there: We’d belong there. There wouldn’t be no more runnin’ around the country. . . . No, sir, we’d have our own place where we belonged, and not sleep in no bunk house” (63). The vision unites George and Candy in a reaction to alienation, which is classically the consequence of the separation of labor from the full process of production. Candy’s alienation (“I planted crops for damn near ever’ybody in this state, but they wasn’t my crops and when I harvested ‘em, it wasn’t none of my harvest” [83]) would be, for George, resolved by the fulfillment of their shared dream: “when we put in a crop, why, we’d be there to take the crop up. We’d know what’d come of our planting” (63). A corollary is freedom from exploitative working conditions: “It ain’t enough land so we’d have to work too hard,” George says, “Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn’t have to buck no barley eleven hours a day” (63). The administration of bodies and the calculated management of life,” which, for Foucault, is an essential element of capitalism (Rabinow 262), would be usurped by the realization of the vision of spatial and temporal freedom: “S’pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball-game, or any damn thing. . . . We’d just go to her. . . . we wouldn’t ask nobody if we could. Jus’ say ‘We’ll go to her,’ an’ we would” (66-67).

In discussing their plan, George warns Candy to be careful not to reveal anything because “They ll’ble to can us so we can’t get no stake” (67). Their plan is potentially subversive because the growing unity between George, Lennie, Candy and even Crooks raises the possibility that they will be able to stake themselves to a few acres of land. This would offer Candy the opportunity to escape the Darwinian consequences of capitalism: “Maybe you’ll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain’t no good at it” (66). Even the cynical Crooks, who has “seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ in the ranches, with bindles on their backs, an’ that same damn thing in their heads,” is caught up in the moment: “If you . . . guys would want a hand to work for nothing—just for his keep, why I’d come an’ lend a hand. I ain’t so crippled I can’t work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to” (84). This excitement soon dissipates, however, when he remembers his position, or rather, when he is reminded of it by the one character who is equally isolated and lonely: Curley’s wife, who points out that “Nigger, I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny” (89).

Ultimately, however, any system that aims to organize and categorize human life must be confronted by its inherent contradictions, those moments of “power-failure.” Foucault points out that “It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques [of biopower] that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (Rabinow 265). This is particularly true of the American West, where the need for migrant labor conflicts with an important function of authority, which is that it “clears up confusion” and “dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways” (Foucault 209). The well-documented brutality of the response to any attempt on the part of migrant workers in the West to act collectively may be seen as a consequence of this conflict, for the expression of power is never so unsophisticated as when it is most threatened.

Throughout the novel, Lennie has been portrayed as an ideal worker for the industrial system: he personifies the sheer bulk and strength of labor power.
Clearly, though, his actions illustrate that he is beyond the control of authority, and therefore a threat to that authority. This is more than simply dramatic irony; it reveals one of the crucial contradictions inherent in “discipline,” the successful expression of which, according to Foucault, “increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (138). Lennie’s physical strength is thus a valuable commodity, but because it cannot be controlled it also constitutes a threat to the very system in which it is valued: the same strength that bucks bales of hay kills the wife of the Boss’s son. His silence has already been interpreted as subversive both by the boss and by Curley (“By Christ, he’s gotta talk when he’s spoke to” [28]), and, according to George, he possesses a quality that cannot be tolerated: “He don’t know no rules” (30); in other words, because he can neither be isolated nor coerced, Lennie exists outside the framework of capitalist practices, “beyond the pale.” Earlier, George had complained that, without Lennie,

I could live so easy. I could get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month came I would take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why I could stay in a cat house all night . . . , get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room.

(12)

This corresponds exactly with George’s vision of the future at the end of the novel but, by the end, it has become a vision of desolation. Lennie’s death signifies the end of the dream of “a coupla acres” of land, and George’s final recitation of that dream constitutes not only Lennie’s last rites, but those of the dream itself. More than simply the “mercy-killing” of a doomed man, it signifies the triumph of capitalist authority.

Works Cited


Charlotte Cook Hadella (essay date 1995)


[In the following essay, Hadella studies the stylistic elements of Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men in order to explore whether, as Steinbeck himself asserted, his fiction was not based on realism but rather on a metaphorical perception of the American dream.]

As has been pointed out earlier in this study, all of Steinbeck’s stories about California farmworkers include realistic details gleaned from the writer’s experiences as an agricultural laborer and from his journalistic investigations of farm labor conditions. Descriptions of the landscape, the use of actual place names (such as Weed and Soledad in Of Mice and Men), the language of the men in the bunkhouse, the details of everyday life (for example, the horseshoe matches and the trips to town on payday)—all contribute to the realistic impression of Of Mice and Men.

Steinbeck nevertheless did not consider himself a realist. In analyzing the author as a literary artist, Timmerman concludes that “[w]hile it is true that much of Steinbeck’s fiction was nurtured by firsthand experience, that experience is transmuted by the artist into a thematic or spiritual experience common to humankind. Realistic in origin, by artistry Steinbeck’s storytelling approaches the realism of the human spirit in much the same way, for example, that Faulkner’s fiction does—by exploring the enduring questions of the nature of humanity, of good and evil, of tragedy and triumph” (Timmerman, 8-9). Stein-
beck’s fictional range thus extends beyond a strict classification of realism; we come closer to understanding his aesthetic principles by examining his tendency to mine sources for convincing detail and then construct metaphors around this detail (Benson, 304).

A central metaphor in Steinbeck’s work is that of America as an imperfect New World, a Garden of Eden; with this motif in mind, Steinbeck appropriated idyllic, pastoral settings for much of his fiction. In a letter to his agent Mavis McIntosh, Steinbeck identified the setting for the stories in The Pastures of Heaven (1932) as a valley about 12 miles from Monterey called Corral de Tierra (LL, 42). To his friend George Albee, Steinbeck announced his intention to represent “the valley of the world” in The Long Valley stories (LL, 73). Commenting on Steinbeck’s preference for setting stories in “small confined valleys,” Benson notes that “the California Coastal valley seems to suggest to [Steinbeck] a dramatic climax to the American Eden myth, a last chance for paradise at the end of the frontier.” Moreover, as Owens asserts in John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America, the California valley setting dictates that the stories “will take place in a fallen world and that the quest for the illusive and illusory Eden will be of central thematic significance” (100).

As further background for my analysis of the Eden motif in Of Mice and Men, I would like to look back in Steinbeck’s canon at one of those early valley stories, a selection from The Pastures of Heaven, which involves a mentally deficient character, Hilda Van Deventer, and her caretaker/mother, Helen. Just as George aims to contain Lennie’s destructive power by retreating with him to an Edenic dream farm, Helen seeks to control her violent daughter by imprisoning her in a walled garden. In both cases, the caretakers are particularly watchful of the sexual awareness of their physically powerful, mentally deficient charges. Thus Steinbeck emphasizes sexual innocence in a prelapsarian Eden, which, according to the Genesis myth, is impossible to maintain if the history of the world is to continue. Such is the case with Steinbeck’s characters, who learn that going back to the garden is impossible. Meanwhile, these characters come to see their predicaments as having only either/or solutions: in the end, both George and Helen fail to maintain control of their situations and finally resort to killing their dangerous wards in order to “protect” them. Though Steinbeck imposes no narrative judgments on the ethics of such drastic measures to preserve innocence, the stories themselves raise ethical questions.

In the Pastures of Heaven story, as in Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck develops the two central characters as opposites, though Jungian overtones of self and shadow self (discussed in detail later in this chapter) are apparent in both stories. Helen Van Deventer, Steinbeck tells us, shrouds herself in sorrow from the time she is 15 years old. She mourns her kitten’s death until her father dies six months later; then her “mourning continued uninterrupted.” Life, it seems, obliges Helen’s hunger for tragedy, and her husband dies in a hunting accident three months after the wedding. Helen does not weep for her loss; instead, she “closed off the drawing room with its [hunting] trophies. Thereafter the room was holy to the spirit of Hubert.”

Six months later, Helen has a baby girl, Hilda, “a pretty, doll-like baby, with her mother’s great eyes” (PH, 65). Hilda’s destructive, angry temperament, however, is the antithesis of Helen’s controlled, restrained personality, and the mother’s calmness only fuels the child’s anger. Steinbeck explains that Helen’s attempts to soothe and pet her child only succeed in increasing her temper. When Hilda is six years old, her doctor informs Helen that the child is mentally ill. With Helen’s response to this announcement, Steinbeck prepares us for the subsequent development of Hilda’s personality. Helen immediately blames herself for Hilda’s illness by claiming “I didn’t have the strength to bear a perfect child.” She then rejects all of the doctor’s suggestions for professional help, insisting that she will keep Hilda with her always, and “no one else must interfere” (PH, 66). George’s decision to keep Lennie with him instead of allowing him to be institutionalized reflects a similar penchant for martyrdom.

Because of their decisions to become caretakers of potentially dangerous people, both Helen and George isolate themselves from productive interaction with others. Helen’s case is more extreme than George’s: she worships daily at the shrine of her dead husband as she nurtures a violent, mentally disturbed child who symbolizes her own repressed emotional and sexual self. Throughout the story, Steinbeck subtly draws attention to the symbolic role of Helen’s daughter. As I will demonstrate later, Lennie serves a similar symbolic role in terms of George’s psychological needs.

Hilda, for example, suffers from visions and dreams of “terrible creatures of the night, with claws and teeth,” and “ugly little men” who “pinched her and gritted their teeth in her ear” (PH, 67). Such visions
function as parallel, but contrasting, manifestations of Helen’s ritual hour in Hubert’s trophy room, during which she “practiced a dream that was pleasure to her” (**PH**, 76). By staring at the mounted trophies—controlled, subdued versions of Hilda’s nightmare creatures—Helen evokes Hubert’s presence. Helen appears to have control over the phenomena of dreams. Just as she sits at Hilda’s bedside all night to banish the nightmare creatures, Helen also practices banishing the creature of her own dreams: “She built up [Hubert’s] image until it possessed the room and filled it with the surging vitality of the great hunter. Then, when she had completed the dream, she smashed it” (**PH**, 77).

Similarly, George controls Lennie’s dreams by teaching him to recite the dream-farm litany. George himself brings our attention to his role as controller of Lennie’s thoughts when he tells Slim that Lennie “can’t think of nothing to do himself, but he sure can take orders” (**OMM**, 39), a remark that reveals George’s naïveté. Though George can put words into Lennie’s mouth, can even silence Lennie when he chooses, his control over Lennie’s physical actions is tenuous.

Helen Van Deventer suffers from the same illusion of control. When Helen suspects that Hilda has made contact with the world beyond her garden because the child proudly shows her a wristwatch that she claims was a gift from an old man, the mother is horrified. Steinbeck writes: Helen “crept into the garden, found a trowel and buried the watch deep in the earth. That week she had a high iron fence built around the garden and Hilda was never permitted to go out alone after that” (**PH**, 68). Helen’s burying the watch and installing the fence underscores her delusional drive to stop time, resist change, and return to an innocent Eden. In spite of Helen’s efforts, when Hilda reaches puberty, she becomes even more difficult to restrain. The girl runs away for four days, is found by the police, and then tells her mother that she “was married to a young gypsy man” and that she was “going to have a little baby” (**PH**, 68).

Even though the doctor affirms Helen’s suspicion that Hilda is lying about the gypsy man, Helen decides to move to a new place. Consequently, she builds a log cabin and retreats even further from life by taking Hilda to Christmas Canyon. The name of the place evokes Christian associations of new life, a chance for salvation—Helen’s apparent reasons for moving; but Steinbeck undercuts these positive expectations with Helen’s insistence that the yard appear as “an old garden” (**PH**, 71) and with the comment that Christmas Canyon is “not a place to farm” (**PH**, 73). These details point to Helen’s quest for an illusion of Eden, a quest that renders her life sterile. By isolating Hilda in an enclosed garden to protect her virginity, Helen acts out the inner drama of repressing her own sexual urges and denying herself the opportunity to fulfill natural physical and emotional desires.

But retreating further into an illusion of paradise does not placate Hilda; in a screaming rage, she declares, “I won’t ever like it here, ever,” and then “she plucked a garden stick from the ground and struck her mother across the breast with it” (**PH**, 72). Nor does the retreat to paradise eliminate Helen’s unarticulated need to overcome her morbid self-repression. On the first night in Christmas Canyon, Helen plans to “welcome her dream” of Hubert “into its new home,” but while she is walking in the garden she experiences a sense of release from her tragic history; she feels as if she is “looking forward to something,” and “all of a sudden Helen realized that she didn’t want to think of Hubert any more” (**PH**, 79-80). Apparently, while Helen is experiencing this sensation of release, Hilda is plotting her own escape from repression. When the two meet at dinner, “all traces of the afternoon’s rage were gone from Hilda’s face; she looked happy, and very satisfied with herself” (**PH**, 80). When Helen comments on her daughter’s pleasant demeanor, Hilda announces her plan to run away and get married.

Ironically, Helen muses that her daughter’s story is just another of her fantasies. Then the mother engages in her own fantasy. To rid herself of Hubert, she must confront him directly. She discovers that “when her mind dropped his hands they disappeared,” and she was free from Hubert’s presence for the first time since his death. The expectancy she had experienced earlier returns to her as she opens the windows, drinks in the night air, and enjoys the sounds of life coming from the garden and beyond. While the mother is experiencing this emotional, spiritual release, Hilda is sawing through one of the oaken bars on her bedroom window and escaping from the house. By representing these scenes as simultaneous occurrences, Steinbeck emphasizes Hilda’s symbolic role as a physical representation of her mother’s spiritual state. A similar juxtaposition of events occurs in *Of Mice and Men*: George is participating in a game of horseshoes with the rest of the ranch hands, enjoying himself, and just being one of the guys, while Lennie, close by in the barn, is having his fatal encounter with Curley’s wife—the incident that leads
to Lennie’s destruction and George’s freedom to become like all the other ranch hands.

Just as George kills Lennie when it appears that repeating with him from the world of everyday life is no longer possible, Helen kills Hilda upon realizing that she can no longer restrain her daughter. When Helen shoots Hilda in the garden she is killing, symbolically, that part of herself that has rebelled against her naturally morbid, sterile personality and has almost escaped the boundaries of her control. Steinbeck allows Hilda’s doctor, as he affirms the coroner’s verdict of suicide, to articulate, unknowingly, the allegorical interpretation of the story: he concludes that a girl like Hilda “might have committed suicide or murder, depending on the circumstances” (PH, 84). Only the reader knows “the circumstances”—that Hilda has committed neither murder nor suicide, but that her mother has, in a sense, committed both acts simultaneously. As Melanie Mortlock notes in her allegorical reading of The Pastures of Heaven, “[w]ith the murder of her daughter, Helen feeds her voracious appetite for self-pity and Old Testament guilt. Because she has fancied herself to be a victim, she inevitably becomes a victimizer, and creates the situation she wants and needs to believe in, the one which permits her ‘the strength to endure.’”

By shooting Hilda, Helen proves to herself what she has “always suspected” (PH, 84): she is capable of whatever measure is required to maintain her delicious martyrdom and to purge her cloistered garden from the temptation of happiness. George’s motives for killing Lennie and what he gains by Lennie’s death cannot be explained as easily since the narrator offers no introspective clues on the subject. Critical discussions of the novella have generally avoided thorough analysis of George’s final actions and have appeared to accept Slim’s cryptic pronouncement, “You hadda, George. I swear you hadda” (OMM, 107). In my analysis of the work, I hope to fill this critical gap by questioning the inevitability of the novella’s final scene.

Looking at the Pastures of Heaven helps us see more clearly how in Of Mice and Men, as in his other California stories, Steinbeck consciously manipulates the thematic association between the realistic valley setting and the mythical implications of the Garden of Eden story. Other forms of symbolism also figure strongly within this mythic framework. The allusive title, Of Mice and Men, is taken from a Robert Burns poem:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o’ mice and men
Gang aft a-gley
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain
For promis’d joy.

Thus, from the outset of the novel, Steinbeck signals that mice are symbols for inevitable failure. And even before the central “scheme” of the story is delineated specifically, Steinbeck connects both central characters with mice: George is described as “small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features” (OMM, 2); Lennie carries a dead mouse in his pocket because he loves to pet soft, furry things. Consequently, Lennie associates mice with the plan of owning the farm and keeping rabbits, which, unlike the mice, will be able to survive his petting them. For Lennie, the rabbits, and by extension all soft, furry things, represent the Edenic dream farm. (Lisca 1981, 136). Steinbeck’s introduction of a dead mouse—a soft, furry thing—into the opening scene of the story thus signifies the ultimate destruction of the dream.

In this symbolic system, Curley’s wife, like the mouse and later the puppy, is simply another nice-to-touch object that is doomed when touched by Lennie. Her death is just the “something” that was bound to happen to shatter George and Lennie’s plan for escaping from their transitory existence as migrant workers (Lisca 1981, 136-38). Of course, mythically and symbolically, Curley’s wife fulfills the role of Woman in the Eden story, as that of the temptress, the despoiler of paradise. That Steinbeck manipulates the raw material of his story to encompass the mythic interpretation is clear. In a New York Times interview in December 1937, Steinbeck, while discussing his sources for characters and incidents in Of Mice and Men, claimed that he had witnessed Lennie’s real-life counterpart kill a man, not a woman:

“I was bindle-stiff myself for quite a spell,” [Steinbeck] said. “I worked in the same country that the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn’t stop him until it was too late.”

To satisfy the mythic framework of his story, then, Steinbeck makes the woman the instrument of destruction of the land dream, although the illusion of
an escape to an Edenic existence would have been shattered just as surely if Lennie had killed Curley, for instance, instead of Curley’s wife.

By thrusting a lonely woman into the society of unsophisticated working men and assigning her a destructive mythic role, Steinbeck may also have been recycling material from a much earlier story, “Fingers of Cloud,” published in the Stanford Spectator in 1924. In Steinbeck’s biography, Benson comments on the lively descriptions in this story, the realistic dialogue of the workers, and the authenticity of the bunkhouse scene as suggestive of Steinbeck’s future mastery of his craft (Benson, 39, 62). The story also sheds some light on Steinbeck’s early interest in the mythic characterization of women. Although the story is by all accounts inferior to Of Mice and Men, it is particularly relevant to my analysis of Curley’s wife. In “Fingers of Cloud,” an 18-year-old orphaned albino girl, Gertie, wanders away from her house and gets lost in a severe thunderstorm. She is taken in by a Filipino work gang in an isolated bunkhouse on a sugar beet ranch in the central valley of California. She becomes the wife of the gang leader, Pedro. Not surprisingly, her presence causes trouble among the workers; Pedro beats Gertie to demonstrate to everyone that he is still in charge, and finally she leaves him. Like Curley’s wife, Gertie is considered to be Pedro’s prize as well as his nemesis. Like Lennie, she is an aberration of nature, an albino.

At the height of the storm that brings the principal characters together, when the men hear Gertie’s cry for help, Steinbeck writes: “The cry came again. It had the far-off quality of a coyote’s yap as it rose and fell. Slowly it came out of the wind, shrieked up to the kill cry of a creature half woman, half lioness, and ended in the sound of water gurgling down a drain pipe.” The men are frightened, and the oldest Filipino warns Pedro not to open the door. “It is the Kari, Pedro—,” he says. “She eats the wet brains of the new-buried dead and she crazes those who see her—Pedro, I command you not to go” (“FC,” 162). Similarly, in Of Mice and Men all of the ranch workers (except Slim) seem to be a bit frightened of Curley’s wife; old Candy warns George that she is a troublemaker, and George forms a negative opinion of the woman before he ever sees her.

Parallels between the sexual dynamics of the novella and the short story are clear. The young woman in Of Mice and Men marries Curley not because she is in love with him or even sexually attracted to him but simply because her choices are limited. From the story she tells Lennie in the barn, we can surmise that she has had little experience with men. In fact, she is still filled with adolescent rage against her mother for refusing to let her go to Hollywood with an actor she had met in Salinas when she was 15. When Curley proposes to her, no doubt she is impressed with his status as the ranch owner’s son and his reputation as a boxer. Marriage to him seems like an attractive alternative to living with a mother who constantly discourages her from thinking about a Hollywood career. Nevertheless, the “respect” she receives at the ranch degenerates quickly into resentment, and once Curley has proven his manhood by marrying her, he appears to neglect her.

Gertie, in “Fingers of Cloud,” not only is inexperienced but also seems to be feebleminded. She has no home life whatsoever, as both of her parents are dead. When she stumbles into the bunkhouse on the night of the storm, Pedro is the one who is brave enough to open the door and face the “Kari.” When she washes the mud from her face and the men see that she is white, Pedro is attracted to her, offers her his room, and then boasts to the other workers that he will make her his wife. Gertie has little to say in the matter, but, for a while at least, she appears to enjoy her status as Pedro’s woman. When the other men begin to show that they dislike her, Pedro also mistreats her. Her mythic power as a Kari fades quickly.

The “Kari,” or “Karei,” is the god of thunder to a Negrito people of the Malay Peninsula. Kari is a creator of humankind, soul-giver, and punisher of sins—particularly sexual sins and cruelty to animals. In this case, Steinbeck takes liberties with the mythic references from which he is gleaning details for the characterization when he has the old Filipino in “Fingers of Cloud” refer to the Kari as a ghoulish female with supernatural powers over anyone who sees her. Steinbeck’s “Kari,” however, does arrive at the bunkhouse during a thunderstorm; and in the opening scene she wanders away from home to climb a mountain, hoping to touch the clouds. Throughout the story, Steinbeck notes Gertie’s attraction to clouds: the story ends as it began, with her wandering away from the “home” Pedro has made for her on a quest to touch the clouds at the top of the mountain.

Though Gertie’s character is whimsical and undeveloped, Steinbeck obviously intended to associate her with the mythic deity of thunder. She even commands respect from Pedro and the other men for a while, as if they believe she possesses supernatural powers; but Gertie has little patience with the men.
when they begin to show their resentment of her. Likewise, Curley’s wife quickly becomes disillusioned with her limited role as the wife of the ranch owner’s son, and she dreams of running away to Hollywood, a fantasy almost as farfetched as the belief that one can touch the clouds. Of course, Steinbeck is not as obvious in his handling of mythic associations in *Of Mice and Men* as he is in “Fingers of Cloud.” For example, no one in the novella refers to Curley’s wife as Eve, yet she is immediately identified by George as the one person who could ruin his chances for paradise.

As for the real-life counterpart of Curley’s wife, Steinbeck was never as forthcoming about her identity as he was about Lennie’s. We may assume that her character is a composite. He did, however, explain in a letter to Claire Luce, the actress who played the part on Broadway, that Curley’s wife “is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one [sic] finds her sexually desirable” (*LL*, 154-55).

Further remarks in the letter deal more specifically with the playscript character than with Curley’s wife in the novella, and will be closely examined in the discussion of the play version in chapter 6 of this study. My immediate focus is on Steinbeck’s portrayal of this character as someone whose life is severely limited, a sympathetic character. Nonetheless, because the mythic discourse on *Of Mice and Men* dictates the exile from the Garden of Eden (symbolized by the land dream), Candy’s assessment of Curley’s wife as a “tart” (*OMM*, 28)—and George’s ready acceptance of this idea—sustains the Eden myth on one level.

A point that is often overlooked by readers who criticize the misogynistic characterization of Curley’s wife is that Steinbeck counters George’s stereotypical condemnation of her by undermining the entire scenario of the Garden of Eden story. Before we even know of Curley’s wife, for instance, Steinbeck intimates that the paradise of the land dream is doomed. Critics generally agree that the groove in the opening scene where George and Lennie spend the night—the same groove in which George shoots Lennie at the end of the story—symbolizes the dream of owning the farm and living “off the fatta the lan’” (*OMM*, 14). Before the central characters enter the story, Steinbeck sets the scene with a vivid description of the “narrow pool”:

> On the valley side the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter’s flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of ‘coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

(*OMM*, 1)

But when Lennie gulps the water from the pool in the grove, George warns him that it might make him sick: “I ain’t sure it’s good water. Looks kinda summy” (*OMM*, 3). George’s comment reveals that symbolically, at least, paradise may already be spoiled.

Other details of the story also underscore the illusive nature of Eden in *Of Mice and Men*. When George talks about the actual farm that he intends to buy for himself and Lennie, he explains to Candy that he can get the place for the low price of $600 because “[t]he ol’ people that owns it is flat bust” (*OMM*, 59). Apparently, the present owners of the farm are not able to live off the fat of the land, a detail that both George and Candy conveniently overlook. Yet Steinbeck, by deliberately bringing this fact to the attention of the reader, creates a tension between George’s mythic discourse of the dream life toward which he is striving and the voice of reality, which says that even if he acquires the piece of land he has in mind, his dream of Eden may not be guaranteed. Still, the identification of a real farm at a reasonable price, a price that George believes he will be able to meet, with Candy’s help, by the end of the month, sets up a countermovement to the pattern of inevitable failure that is carefully constructed in the first two parts of the story. Lisca notes that this interruption of the pattern of inevitability in the novella creates “the necessary ingredient of free will. The story achieves power through a delicate balance of the protagonists’ free will and the force of circumstance” (Lisca 1981, 138).

Moreover, it is the force of circumstance, which we have already seen was very real to many Americans during the 1930s, that gives *Of Mice and Men* both its realistic edge and its accessibility to myth. In *The
Legacy of Conquest, an analysis of development in the American West after the alleged closing of the frontier in 1890, Patricia Limerick deals with the unavoidable Garden of Eden analogy in the following manner: “When Adam lived in Eden, he lived off the bounty of nature. After he sinned, his conditions of employment took a turn for the worse: he had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. If the fall from Eden had followed the patterns of Western American history, Adam would have carried a further burden: he would have sold the crops he produced at an unpredictable, often disappointing price—or he would have worked for wages.” As Limerick points out in example after example, most American pioneers did not venture to the western frontier to become wage earners. They came with the intention of staking claims in gold and silver mines, acquiring numerous acres of valuable farming or grazing land, or mastering vast tracts of wilderness and selling the bounty to others; at the very least, these adventurers expected to become self-sufficient property owners, living off the fat of the land.

Though some did “strike it rich” in the West, so to speak, many more lost either their lives or their life savings when confronted with hostile weather conditions, dangerous terrain, and/or native populations unwilling to relinquish their ancestral home to newcomers. Many families and individuals whose enterprises succeeded initially were reduced to poverty during the Great Depression. For those people who had lost everything or who had gained little to begin with, all that could be done was to hire on as wage earners under the lucky entrepreneurs who had won the race for riches on the great frontier and had managed to survive the Depression.

These wage earners, Limerick’s fallen Adams, are the prototypes for the central characters in Of Mice and Men. The responsibilities of brotherhood and the longing for a return to Eden are major themes in the story, of course. But to fully appreciate Steinbeck’s craft, we must understand that this story about two migrant farmworkers with a dream is not simply a realistic novel with mythical biblical overtones. It is also a western American fable in which Steinbeck exposes the pioneering impulse to view people and places as commodities subject to the idiosyncrasies of the marketplace, an impulse that often disguises itself as an idyllic quest for the American dream. The disguise in this case is the surface story in Of Mice and Men, which might be read as a sentimental interlude in the lives of two hard-working, down-and-out barley buckers, George Milton and Lennie Small—guys who just want to buy a little place of their own and become self-sufficient. The potential for sentimentality ripens when these two form a coalition with old Candy, the injured farmhand whose days of employment are numbered. Surely George and Lennie will let Candy come and live with them, do some cooking and cleaning, have a little garden of his own. Things seem to be working out fine until that evil entity—Woman, in the person of Curley’s wife—enters the picture and makes the passage to paradise impossible.

Though at times it seems that George doubts the possibility of ever owning a farm, his insistence that Lennie believe in the dream results not only from his need to control Lennie’s actions but from a sincere commitment to Lennie. Both Louis Owens and William Goldhurst have discussed Of Mice and Men in light of the Cain and Abel story. Owens asserts that loneliness is the central theme of the novella and that the story is not as pessimistic as some critics have insisted. If we accept the non-teleological premise of the story, we understand that human beings are flawed and that their hopes of regaining Eden are illusory. Owens believes that the characters’ commitment to the dream and to each other, however, is not flawed. He explains: “The dream of George and Lennie represents a desire to defy the curse of Cain and fallen man—to break the pattern of wandering and loneliness imposed on the outcasts and to return to the perfect garden. George and Lennie achieve all of this dream that is possible in the real world: they are their brother’s keeper” (Owens 1985, 102). Similarly, Goldhurst offers an allegorical reading of Of Mice and Men as Steinbeck’s parable of the curse of Cain, delineating the ways in which the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” permeates the story as other characters are affected by the commitment between George and Lennie (Goldhurst, 48-59). Curley is suspicious of it, Slim admires it, and Candy and Crooks briefly participate in the brotherhood by looking after Lennie when George is not around. Although all of the plans for buying the farm are shattered when Lennie dies, Steinbeck still leaves the reader with an image of two men together as George and Slim walk away from the grove by the river where the story had begun.

On another level, however, even while George accepts responsibility for Lennie, he realizes that he must face the harsh realities of keeping such a brother. He takes stock of the situation and makes calculating decisions about his course of action. Lennie, as a natural resource, represents a wealth of
physical labor, strength that George tries to harness and turn into earning power for the good of both men. Realizing that few people will make exceptions for Lennie’s handicap, George plans to sell himself and his sidekick to the ranch boss as a package deal. On their way to the ranch, George tells Lennie, “We’re gonna go in an’ see the boss. Now, look—I’ll give him the work tickets, but you ain’t gonna say a word. You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we’re set” (OMM, 6).

George does not expect the rancher to view his situation humanely—only economically. Unfortunately, Lennie’s strength cannot be separated from his essential nature of unpredictable, uncontrollable violence, a power that George only fools himself into thinking he controls. As handler of two men’s wages, though, George believes he will be able to get a stake together, buy a small farm, and finally remove Lennie from the working world that he endangers and is endangered by. Such a move will also allow George to escape from the authoritarianism of the workplace that he seems to resent bitterly.

When the boss at the ranch realizes that Lennie is mentally deficient, he questions George: “Say—what you sellin’... what stake you got in this guy? You takin’ his pay away from him?” (OMM, 22). George insists, of course, that he’s not selling Lennie out; nevertheless, the confrontation highlights the ranch owner’s view of the worker as something less than human, an object subject to the laws of bargaining. Because of the economic factors involved, George and Lennie’s story takes on harsh edges—goes beyond a moralistic retelling of Cain and Abel or paradise lost. Lennie becomes the commodity that George must manage, invest in, if you will, in order to save him. George’s ownership of Lennie’s work power is evidenced, for example, by his appropriation of Lennie’s work ticket. To accuse George of exploitation would be too harsh, but circumstances indicate that without Lennie’s wages added to his own, George wouldn’t have a chance of buying that little farm.

These same economic factors undercut the sentimentality of the partnership with Candy. George doesn’t decide to let Candy in on the land deal because he has compassion for the old man. Steinbeck obviously solicits sympathy for Candy by drawing out the scene in which Carlson persuades him to “trade in” his old dog for a new one. Even here, Steinbeck develops the plot by employing the language of the “hard sell.” Carlson convinces Candy that his dog is of no use to anyone and a misery to himself and others. As effectively as an experienced salesman, Carlson “sells” Candy on the idea of killing the old dog and selecting a replacement from the litter of puppies in the barn. George witnesses the scene and no doubt realizes that Candy has been pressured into doing something that he may regret. Nevertheless, even after Candy’s speech about losing his hand, collecting the compensation, and putting away extra cash because he anticipates being fired, George hesitates to make him a partner. But when Candy says, “I’d make a will an’ leave my share to you guys in case I kick off, cause I ain’t got no relatives nor nothing” (OMM, 59), suddenly the matter is settled: George decides to write to the people who own the farm, make an offer, and send $100 of Candy’s money to bind the deal.

Candy thus not only buys his way into the brotherhood, he promises to will his share of it to George. Steinbeck underscores the importance of Candy’s monetary contribution to the cause by juxtaposing Candy’s acceptance into the brotherhood with Crooks’s rejection from it by George. Crooks, who has no cash but can only offer his labor, is never a serious partner in the land dream. Though he joins in the discussion with Lennie and Candy about growing a garden and raising rabbits, as soon as George enters the scene and scolds Candy and Lennie for making their plans public, Crooks withdraws from the conversation.

On the other hand, Curley’s wife, who also wishes to escape the ranch, is unable to buy her way into George’s brotherhood. Immediately George “sizes her up” in monetary terms: “Bet she’d clear out for twenty bucks,” he says to Candy after the woman has made her first appearance at the bunkhouse on the pretense of looking for Curley (OMM, 32). George underestimates her loneliness and disillusionment, however. Eventually we learn that she will “clear out” for even less than “twenty bucks”: she plans to leave the ranch for the mere promise of a life in Hollywood where she’ll become the girl on the silver screen, wear nice clothes, have many admirers, and live happily ever after. It is not surprising that Steinbeck reserves the emptiest and most commercial of American dreams for Curley’s wife. Her desire to be part of an industry that glamorizes the transformation of real people into commodities for commercial exchange emphasizes the very parsimony of choices available to women in the 1930s, even if they had the independent will to reject the traditional role of home-maker.
That Curley’s wife views herself as a commodity is evident from details of her make-up and “costume”: “She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung 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” (*OMM*, 31). She has cultivated the look of a Hollywood actress or a magazine model, and even her body movements appear to be studied gestures from movies or photographs. When she talks to Lennie and George, “She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward” (*OMM*, 31). As Lennie’s eyes moved down over her body, “she bridled a little” and “looked at her fingernails” (*OMM*, 31). She plays the only role she knows how to play, even though what she really wants is someone to talk to.

Talking to others as a way of defining oneself and exercising power over another person’s speech as a way of controlling or limiting that person are concepts that are repeated throughout the story. Several times George warns Lennie not to speak: when they meet the boss, for instance, and after they meet Curley. George also tells Lennie not to talk to Curley’s wife. Crooks, too, after his initial attempt to drive Lennie from his room, finally invites Lennie to sit down on a nail keg and begins talking to him about his childhood. After a moment, Crooks laughs and makes this observation: “A guy can talk to you an’ be sure you won’t go blabbin’ . . . I seen it over an’ over—a guy talkin’ to another guy and it don’t make no difference if he don’t hear or understand. The thing is, they’re talkin’, or they’re settin’ still not talkin’. It don’t make no difference, no difference. . . . It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all” (*OMM*, 70-71).

Curley’s wife expresses this same sentiment when, in her most sincere moment in the novella, she says to Lennie, “I get lonely. . . . You can talk to people, but I can’t talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How’d you like not to talk to anybody?” (*OMM*, 87). Her only defense against the rejection she faces at every turn is her dream of Hollywood fame, which she shares with Lennie: ‘Coulda been in the movies, an’ had nice clothes—all them nice clothes like they wear. An’ I coulda sat in them big hotels, an’ had pitchers took of me’” (*OMM*, 89). In this same scene, we learn that the girl has gotten her notion of stardom from a traveling show actor whom she met at the Riverside Dance Palace, a guy who told her she was a natural for the movies and who promised to write to her as soon as he got back to Hollywood.

Significantly, the dreams held by both Lennie and Curley’s wife are shaped by someone else; their words, gestures, even their thoughts come from mimicking others. Free will, in fact, hardly seems to exist for people like Curley’s wife and Lennie. Whether George is exercising free will when he shoots Lennie is a more complex issue because of the ambiguity of his character throughout the book. Because Steinbeck uses animal imagery to describe Lennie on several occasions, Lennie can be seen as a symbol of humankind’s animal nature. When he drinks from the pool in the grove, for example, he “dabble[s] his big paw in the water” (*OMM*, 3); when he returns to the river at the end of the story, “Lennie appear[s] out of the brush, and he [comes] as silently as a creeping bear moves” (*OMM*, 100). Lisca has pointed out that the name Leonard means “strong or brave as a lion” while George means “husbandman” (Lisca 1981, 139), a detail that confers free will upon George and denies it to Lennie. It is also possible to gain a clearer understanding of this important issue of free will as it applies to the major actions and characters of the story by examining it through the interpretive lens of psychoanalytic strategies.

One possible reading of the story suggests that the two characters, Lennie and George, are different facets of one personality. Obviously, Lennie often functions on the level of the unconscious. His violent responses to fear illustrate that strong, destructive forces loom just beneath the surface of his consciousness. Even hypothetical threats, such as cats eating the rabbits on the imaginary farm, move Lennie to violent outbursts: “You jus’ let ‘em try to get the rabbits,” he tells George. “I’ll break their God damn necks. I’ll . . . I’ll smash ‘em with a stick!” (*OMM*, 58). It is also clear that George tries to exert a conscious control over Lennie. George tells Lennie when to speak and to whom; he makes Lennie promise to return to the grove by the river if there is any trouble on the ranch. But as evidenced by the earlier incident in Weed and the fracas in the bunkhouse during which Lennie crushes Curley’s hand, George’s control of his partner’s powerfully destructive physical strength is actually quite tenuous.

In this interpretive frame, we might say that Lennie acts as an extension of George, a powerful id to George’s ego. Mark Spilka develops this kind of Freudian reading of the novel, though he does not use the terms *id* and *ego* to describe the relationship between the two characters. Clearly Lennie, without thinking about what he is doing, seems to be carrying out George’s wishes when he severely injures
Curley in the bunkhouse fight. George has made no secret of his disgust with Curley, having declared, “I’m scared I’m gonna tangle with that bastard myself” (OMM, 37). George also instantly detests Curley’s wife and honors her with such invectives as “bitch,” “poison,” and “jail bait” (OMM, 32). Even though Lennie responds to the girl sensually and thinks she is “pury,” that stroking her hair is “nice” (OMM 32, 91), he eventually becomes the instrument of her destruction.

In an early response to Of Mice and Men, Stanley Edgar Hyman argued that readers had drawn erroneous conclusions about the meaning of the story because they failed to recognize “that the book functions on two marked levels, the symbolic and the real, and that despite their vastly different directions and meanings, it has proved hard for most readers to keep them separate” (Tedlock and Wicker, 159). Hyman sees the symbolic message as a purely social one: George, a radical leader, attempts to lead Lennie, a symbol of the masses, to a utopia. Lennie, because he is too strong and too untrustworthy, fails George, and thus the utopia fails. On the realistic level, Hyman argues, George is simply a worker who is trying to get out of his class and move into the owning class. Hyman writes: “This foolhardy ambition collapses, the vessel of George’s discontent (Lennie), is killed off, and at the end Steinbeck hints at the formation of new alliance between George and the adjusted worker functioning successfully within his class, Slim” (Tedlock and Wicker, 159).

Both Spilka’s and Hyman’s analyses of characters and events give reasonable accounts of the partnership between the two central characters; they even suggest that George needs Lennie as much as Lennie needs George. They do not, however, satisfactorily explain why George so vehemently despises Curley’s wife or why he kills his partner at the end of the novel. To come to terms with these issues, we must deal with the antagonistic forces within George’s psyche, forces that may be interpreted as Jungian archetypes. We know from Carol Henning, Steinbeck’s first wife, that Steinbeck’s friendship with the Jungian philosopher Joseph Campbell in the early 1930s had a discernible effect on the writer’s intellectual development. The two men met frequently at Ed Ricketts’s laboratory in Monterey where they discussed ideas and books (Benson, 223-25). Recognizing Steinbeck’s familiarity with Jung’s work, critics have noted the psychoanalytic influences in the novels To a God Unknown and In Dubious Battle and in several of the stories in The Long Valley. Like-
That Lennie has survived as long as he has is proof of George’s commitment to his care. Still, the motives underlying that commitment are never clearly delineated. Steinbeck deliberately avoids explaining exactly how Lennie and George became sidekicks. We know that Lennie’s Aunt Clara asked George to look after Lennie when she died. George’s relationship with Aunt Clara, though, is a mystery; and we haven’t a clue as to how long ago she died. We know from George’s complaints about never being able to keep a job that the incident in Weed is just one of many unfortunate adventures with Lennie. In fact, Steinbeck tells us very little about their past except that George and Lennie played together as children, and as they grew older George came to realize that Lennie was dumb and could be easily manipulated. George tells Slim, “Used to play jokes on ‘im cause he was too dumb to take care of ‘imself. But he was too dumb even to know he had a joke played on him. I had fun. Made me seem God damn smart alongside of him. Why he’d do any damn thing I tol’ him” (OMM, 40).

Then, in “the tone of confession,” George relates in more detail the incident at the Sacramento River that put an end to his childhood pranks involving Lennie. In this episode, George is showing off in front of “a bunch of guys,” and he tells Lennie to jump in the river, even though Lennie could not swim. “He damn near drowned before we could get him,” George tells Slim. “An’ he was so damn nice to me for pullin’ him out. Clean forgot I told him to jump in. Well, I ain’t done nothing like that no more” (OMM, 40). The details of this event, while adding to the realistic texture of the story and to character development, also reinforce the Jungian relationship between the conscious self (George) and the unconscious self (Lennie). It is more than coincidence that George’s realization of his own responsibility for Lennie’s actions occurs in a river, the symbol of Jung’s collective unconsciousness.

Nonetheless, it is unclear whether or not George completely grasps the potential danger of Lennie’s mindless strength: several times George insists that Lennie “ain’t mean,” but he also warns that Curley is “gonna get hurt if he messes around with Lennie” because Lennie “don’t know no rules” (OMM, 27, 28). But George, who presumably does know the rules, doesn’t always choose to follow them. He decides, for example, to camp at the river instead of reporting to the ranch in the evening. By arriving at the ranch in the morning instead of the night before, George and Lennie miss half a day of work and incur the ranch owner’s anger before he even meets them. This one incident could be an indicator that George’s failure to keep a job in the past cannot all be blamed on Lennie. After the tense interview with their new boss, however, George immediately blames Lennie for making the ranch owner suspicious of them.

All of these minor details are indicative of George’s violently aggressive nature. Both fearing and repressing the primitive impulses in himself, he projects them onto Lennie. The dream farm represents a haven in which George’s aggression (represented by Lennie) can be repressed. George devises the plan to escape from the real world of migrant life—bunkhouses, rough men, whiskey, and whorehouses—because he is disturbed by the qualities in himself that such a life brings to the surface. Unconsciously, he projects undesirable characteristics onto his shadow self, then feels the need to control that self by isolating it in the safe haven of the Edenic dream farm. Meanwhile, George inadvertently directs Lennie toward disaster by staying at the ranch even after the trouble with Curley and by making Lennie fearful of Curley’s wife. Though George may realize that Lennie will eventually do something terrible for which he will have to be incarcerated or destroyed, he does not take him away from the ranch because of an unconscious desire to rid himself of his shadow.

A Jungian interpretation of Of Mice and Men highlights the conflict of personalities and priorities in the story. It also points to a more thorough understanding of the characterization of Curley’s wife than has previously been offered. Just as Lennie may be seen as George’s shadow self, Curley’s wife has characteristics of the Jungian anima. The contrasexual figure—the animus of woman, and the anima of a man—represents the face of “absolute evil” and is usually not recognized by the subject as part of his or her own psyche (Jung, 148). One face of a man’s anima is the seductress, a projection that embodies the negative, unconscious, and unrealized aspects of the psyche to which a man responds with fear. At the same time that the anima arouses libidinal drives within the psyche, a patriarchal consciousness strives to repress the feminine force. For example, the first time that George and Lennie see Curley’s wife, Lennie’s comment, “Gosh, she was perty” (OMM, 32), triggers a violent reaction from George, who grabs his partner by the ear and shakes him: “Listen to me, you crazy bastard,” he said fiercely, “don’t you even take a look at that bitch. I don’t care what she says and what she does. I seen ’em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be.”
Lennie tried to disengage his ear. “I never done nothing, George.”

“No, you never. But when she was standin’ in the doorway showin’ her legs, you wasn’t lookin’ the other way, neither.”

*(OMM, 32)*

Though Lennie’s comment seems innocent and naïve enough, George’s statements are vicious. He, too, “wasn’t lookin’ the other way” when the woman was standing in the doorway; he, too, notices her appearance and gestures, and his response to her is much more intense than Lennie’s.

Curley’s wife represents a mysterious and autonomous force that stimulates George’s sexual consciousness, challenges his manhood, inspires self-doubt, and taunts him for his meanness. Throughout the story, George gives conscious expression to these feelings. For instance, he admits it is mean of him to lose his temper over Lennie’s wanting ketchup with his beans *(OMM, 12)*; and he tells Slim about the tricks he played on Lennie when they were youngsters *(OMM, 40)*. Also, George is reluctant to express himself sexually: when Whit tries to interest him in visiting Susy’s place on Saturday night, he insists that if he does go to the whorehouse, it will only be to buy whiskey. The overt sexuality of Curley’s wife is an inversion of George’s puritanical nature, and as George’s anima she sparks an intensely negative reaction from him. She also serves as a conscious reminder of his longing to “live so easy and maybe have a girl” *(OMM, 7)*, the dream that he represses because of his association with Lennie.

Given the grim socioeconomic circumstances of the laborers and of Curley’s wife, it is reasonable to assume that they dream of escaping reality. Several times in the novel George expresses the desire to change his life. Sometimes he imagines himself free of the responsibility of looking after Lennie: he could keep a job and not always have to be on the move; maybe he could have a girl, or he could go into town with the guys whenever he wanted to; he could shoot pool, drink whiskey, etc. At other times he talks about buying the little farm where he could have a garden and Lennie could tend rabbits. These dreams have several elements in common: each represents a change from the status quo and each holds forth some form of freedom for George. Notwithstanding, the two scenarios are mutually exclusive.

In a sense, George’s dreams compete throughout the text for actualization and verbalization; and though they are voiced by the same character each time, they are spoken in different “voices.” The narrative expositive attached to George’s speech about life without Lennie is, “George exploded” *(OMM, 11)*. His description of living “so easy” comes out in anger; the words spew forth unhearsed. In contrast, when George tells Lennie about the farm, his voice “became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before” *(OMM, 13)*. The signal is clear: we are not experiencing George’s “voice” as we had been in the present-tense situation of the story, and the words of his speech may not even be his own. The dream-farm litany may simply reflect George’s lip service to the promise that he made to Lennie’s Aunt Clara, a plan reflecting the illusion of the American dream and a belief in the mythic innocence of a prelapsarian Eden. This close examination of the narrative syntax in the passages related to the competing dreams reveals that Steinbeck consciously created dialogic tension in the text.

To explain the dialogic tension, or double-voicedness, in *Of Mice and Men*, I am borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of discourse as dialogue between a speaker and a listener about a hero or subject. In verbal and written utterances, the subject becomes an active agent, interacting with the speaker “to shape language and determine form,” and the subject (or hero) often becomes the dominant influence. Dialogic tension exists in all discourse because words, the elements of the dialogue, are loaded with various social nuances that influence one another and perhaps even change as a result of the association. According to Bakhtin, “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones . . . are inevitable in the word” *(Bakhtin, 293)*.

Several times in the story George is questioned about his relationship with Lennie; his responses to the questions vary greatly depending on the context of the inquiry and on his relationship with the questioner. When the ranch boss asks George, “Say—what you sellin’?” George responds defensively and lies about Lennie’s being his cousin *(OMM, 22-23)*. But when Slim observes, “Funny how you an’ him string along together,” George views the comment as an “invitation to confidence” and tells Slim the truth about his relationship with Lennie *(OMM, 39)*. In both of these exchanges, the subject of discussion is George’s relationship with Lennie. George is the speaker in both cases, but because the listeners differ, the subject changes shape or form and appears to control the
speaker. Like the hero in a piece of fiction, the subject dominates the situation and ultimately determines the speech act.

Steinbeck also manipulates the levels of dialogic tension in the story by having various characters reveal their inner thoughts to Lennie, an uncomprehending listener: George does this, as do Crooks and Curley’s wife. In each instance, the characters tell Lennie about their dreams; also, in each instance, the contexts of the speeches to Lennie are more like dialogues between the speaker and the subject than dialogues between two comprehending speakers. Yet having Lennie to talk to gives credence to the utterances. Like George, who is a drifter and thus an outsider wherever he goes, both Curley’s wife and Crooks are obviously starved for companionship and acceptance as both are systematically ostracized from the ranch community—Crooks because of race and Curley’s wife because of gender.

Part 4, which takes place in the stable buck’s room, highlights the dialectical nature of Crooks’s discourse. When Lennie first approaches Crooks, the black man warns, “You got no right to come in my room” (OMM, 68). Crooks is very territorial about the limited space that has been allotted to him on the ranch. He complains to Lennie, “I don’t know what you’re doin’ in the barn anyway. . . . You ain’t no Skinner. They’s no call for a buckin’ to come into the barn at all” (OMM, 68). Finally, Crooks gruffly invites Lennie to “Come on in and set a while” (OMM, 69); as soon as Lennie begins talking about living on a farm and tending to rabbits, Crooks’s voice softens and he tells his own story about growing up on the chicken ranch that his father had owned. When Crooks realizes that Lennie really doesn’t have the capacity to carry on an interactive conversation, he says, “George can tell you screwy things, and it don’t matter. It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all” (OMM, 71).

No sooner does Crooks come to this realization than he sets about destroying his own chance to capitalize on Lennie’s companionship, the comfort of “just bein’ with another guy.” Instead of “just talking,” Crooks takes advantage of Lennie’s feeblemindedness: “His [Crooks’s] voice grew soft and persuasive, ‘S’pose George don’t come back no more. S’pose he took a powder and just ain’t coming back. What’ll you do then?’” (OMM, 71). When Lennie becomes violently defensive of George, Crooks retracts his statements; he moves from chiding Lennie about his dream farm to expressing his longing to participate in the escape.

To reinforce the notion of illusive dreams, Steinbeck also has the girl recount her fantasy of escaping the lonely, restricted life of the ranch. Curley and most of the hired men have gone into town to carouse at the saloons and whorehouses. When Candy, Crooks, and Lennie shun Curley’s wife’s company on Saturday night, she tells them contemptuously, “I could of went with the shows. Not jus’one, neither. An a guy tol’ me he could put me in pitchers” (OMM, 78). Just “the weak ones” (OMM, 77) have been left behind, and Curley’s wife seeks the only companionship available to her. The next day she describes her dream again in a conversation with Lennie in the barn just before he accidentally breaks her neck. Here she tells her story “in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away” (OMM, 88). With this narrative commentary Steinbeck emphasizes that being able to share one’s dream with a sympathetic audience—the companionship implied by such an action—is as important as realizing the dream.

Similarly, the contextual overtones of the dream-farm passages as they play out between George and Lennie are twofold: mythical and communal. Sometimes the description of the land dream is delivered as if it were a religious incantation, as when George deepens his voice and speaks rhythmically. At other times the story is related as dialogue or as a chorus of two or more speakers who combine their “speech acts” (Bakhtin’s term) to create a composite image. This happens when Lennie interrupts George’s recitation about the farm and is coaxed into completing the story himself (OMM, 14). Later, in the bunkhouse, after George has agreed to a partnership with Candy, Steinbeck notes that “each mind was popped into the future when this lovely thing would come about” (OMM, 60). With their minds on the future, Lennie, George, and Candy discuss their plan, each one adding a specific detail to the description of life on the farm. Lennie, of course, mentions feeding the rabbits; Candy asks if there will be a stove; and George imagines taking a holiday and going to a carnival, a circus, or a ball game. (OMM, 60-61).

Significantly, both Lennie’s and Candy’s comments deal with specific details of farm life, while George’s contribution to this idyllic picture focuses on activities that would take him away from the farm. Though his comments are in keeping with the spirit of camaraderie that flows through the conversation, the thematic shift to nonfarm activities is a subtle clue that George’s version of the future does not coincide with that of his partners. What George seems to be doing
in this speech is reconciling the mythic vision with the more personal vision of how he would live his life if he did not have to look after Lennie. Though George recites the dream-farm myth, it is possible that he is not really committed to it. After all, the primary reason for acquiring the farm is to remove Lennie from the everyday working world in which he cannot seem to stay out of trouble. While Lennie’s presence necessitates keeping the dream alive, his uncontrollable strength and outbursts of violence virtually assure that the dream will not come true.

By introducing both of George’s dreams in the opening scene of the story, and by emphasizing the differences in the way they are “voiced,” Steinbeck highlights the dialectical nature of the narrative, a tension that is maintained throughout the text. From scene to scene, as George appears to be working conscientiously toward achieving the land dream, he is actually moving closer and closer to the competing dream, which is not really a dream at all but a rather mundane description of the bunkhouse life that might be possible for George if he did not have to worry about Lennie. George’s immediate attraction to Slim, along with Slim’s reciprocal friendship, substantiates a countermovement in the story, movement away from the dream-farm impulse. Not until Lennie’s death is George free to join the community of men represented by Slim. As the only character in the novel who understands that George did not kill Lennie in self-defense, Slim expresses his approval of George’s actions. Then he offers to buy George a drink, and together they walk away from the river grove where Lennie has died. It is important to recall that after the first entrance of Curley’s wife and George’s negative reaction to her, Lennie cries out instinctively, “I don’t like this place, George. This ain’t no good place. I wanna get outa here” (OMM, 32). But in spite of all the danger signs, signals that even Lennie can translate, George decides to stay at the ranch, a decision that leads ultimately to a resolution of the conflict between George’s competing dreams.

Through the dialogical structure of the text, Steinbeck maintains narrative tension without articulating moral judgments. George is neither unreasonable nor unrealistic when he imagines himself unencumbered by his promise to Lennie’s Aunt Clara. Still, any moral judgment that might influence our interpretation of the final scene must come from an acceptance or rejection of the inevitability of Lennie’s death, a decision that in part depends on our interpretation of Slim’s character. At times, Steinbeck seems to be depicting Slim as the ideal man: he is an expert on the job, and the other workers defer to his judgment in both personal and professional matters. He even demonstrates his clout with the boss’s son by extracting the promise from Curley not to try to get Lennie fired for crushing his (Curley’s) hand. Yet in the matter of killing Candy’s dog, Slim sides with Carlson, not a very sympathetic character by any standard. In fact, Slim casts the deciding vote when he says, “Carl’s right, Candy. That dog ain’t no good to himself. I wisht somebody’d shoot me if I got old an’ a cripple” (OMM, 45). Slim’s comment here extends beyond the situation in question and makes an enormous ethical leap by equating the killing of a useless dog with the killing a seemingly useless person, a person who is “old an’ a cripple,” an accurate description of Candy himself.

No narrative comment attends this bone-chilling pronouncement except “Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim’s opinions were law” (OMM, 45). None of the other men show any reaction to Slim’s decision, though “Candy looked for help from face to face” (OMM, 45). The incident is not mentioned again until Candy tells George that he should have had the courage to shoot the dog himself instead of letting a stranger do it. Though Steinbeck maintains his unblaming narrative stance in relation to this incident, he makes obvious links between Carlson’s shooting of the dog and George’s shooting of Lennie with Carlson’s gun.

Lennie’s death, of course, leads to the inevitable resolution of the narrative tension, but Steinbeck offers few syntactical clues to help the reader decide exactly what motivates George to kill Lennie. As George calmly tells his partner about the farm, he hesitates to raise the pistol even after he hears the footsteps of Curley and the other men. Steinbeck prolongs the inevitable resolution of the crisis with this comment: “The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices” (OMM, 106). Even at the most dramatic moment, Steinbeck resists the temptation to preach to his readers or to sentimentalize George’s actions.

George saves himself from prosecution by claiming that Lennie had the gun when he found him and that the shooting was in self-defense. We should not overlook the fact, however, that by taking Carlson’s gun from the bunkhouse before he goes in search of Lennie, George inadvertently fuels the temper of the lynch mob because the men assume that Lennie has stolen Carlson’s Luger and is armed. Moreover,
Steinbeck illustrates the limits of Slim’s control over the other men when Slim fails to persuade Curley to stay at the ranch. By the time Slim verbalizes his judgment on the shooting of Lennie—“You hadda, George. I swear you hadda” (OMM, 107)—the “prince of the ranch” appears to have abdicated his power. The men follow Curley in a bloodthirsty chase instead of letting Slim handle the capture and arrest.

Steinbeck further undercut the significance of Slim’s pronouncement by giving Carlson the last word: when Slim and George walk away from the grove together, Carlson says, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” (OMM, 107). By ending the novella with a question about George and Slim, Steinbeck leaves the reader with questions as well: Did George have to shoot Lennie? Couldn’t Slim have controlled the mob and seen that Lennie was taken into custody by the proper officials? Was Lennie’s death at George’s hand the inevitable outcome of events, or did George have other choices? In spite of Slim’s approval, it is obvious that George was acting willfully when he killed Lennie: he did not have to kill his partner; he chose to do so. Though one could argue that George took Carlson’s Luger in order to protect himself and Lennie against the advances of the mob, such a speculation seems unlikely.

It is far more reasonable to assume that George planned to shoot Lennie as soon as he discovered that Lennie had killed Curley’s wife. By killing Lennie, George consciously decides to give his friend the only protection available to him. With the fatal pistol shot, George rationalizes that he has sent Lennie off to the dream farm forever. By the time George walks away from the grove with Slim, he has let go of the escape dream for himself as well and has embraced the competing dream of living without Lennie and just being one of the guys. Though Steinbeck lets the reader decide which George speaks through the pistol—the one who creates the world of protected innocence or the one who expresses a desire for freedom—he makes one thing very clear: George’s pulling the trigger is a reaction to the voices of a cruel reality from which neither he nor Lennie can escape any longer.


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Of Mice and Men is widely available in paperback through Penguin Books, the edition used in this study.


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NONFICTION


SECONDARY WORKS

BOOK-LENGTH CRITICAL STUDIES AND COLLECTIONS


Richard E. Hart (essay date 1997)


[In the following essay, Hart argues, through an examination of Steinbeck’s early fiction that includes Of Mice and Men, that the author subscribed to a modified form of literary naturalism in which natural forces may push a person into making a choice—a stance that Hart labels “soft determinism.”]

There’s a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them.

“The Red Pony”

Maybe the challenge was in the land; or it might be that the people made the challenge.

—“Afterword,” America and Americans

It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millennia ago have disappeared from the face of the earth, a few remnants of fossilized jaw bones, a few teeth in strata of limestone would be the only mark our species would have left on the earth. Now this I must say and say right here and so sharply and so memorably that it will not be forgotten in the terrible and disheartening things which are to come in this book; that although East of Eden is not Eden, it is not insuperably far away.

—Journal of a Novel: The “East of Eden” Letters

This essay examines the unique form of John Steinbeck’s naturalism and the ambiguous, somewhat paradoxical view of the relation between man and nature found in his fictional creations, with particular reference to some of the early work. Perhaps words such as “ambiguous” and “paradoxical” are not perfectly suitable in this context and, in any case, may seem strangely out of place in a project that hopes to demonstrate convincingly the philosophically coherent and insightful ideas that Steinbeck presented regarding man and nature. Ironically, as the existentialists have made us realize, philosophical clarity often grows out of perplexity and ambiguity. It simply goes with the territory of life and experience. With sufficient patience and analysis, however, we can begin to see the unity and depth of Steinbeck’s philosophy. Though I may be nearly a lone voice in this realm, I take strong exception to the fairly common charge, like that once made by Stanley Edgar Hyman in a review of the Sea of Cortez for the New Republic, that Steinbeck was simply preoccupied with “rambling philosophizing” for its own sake. His was simply too mature and serious an intellect to fall prey to idle musings or dilettantish posturing. Gloria Gaither rightly says, “Any discussion of Steinbeck the social reformer, Steinbeck the artist/writer, Steinbeck the journeyer, Steinbeck the marine biologist, remains inconclusive without a deep appreciation for and genuine understanding of Steinbeck the philosopher” (Gaither 43).

An eloquent indication of Steinbeck’s treatment of the relation between man and nature was captured, I believe, by Anders Österling, a permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, in the presentation address (1962) that he delivered when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize: “But in him we find the American temperament also in his great feeling for nature, for
the tilled soil, the wasteland, the mountains, and the ocean coasts, all an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Steinbeck in the midst of, and beyond, the world of human beings” (Frenz 574). The philosophically intriguing aspect of this observation, which will be elaborated here, is the phrase “in the midst of, and beyond.” A great feeling for nature in the midst of the world of humans and beyond the world of humans—just what does this mean or imply?

Steinbeck’s early “California” fiction is typically described as firmly ensconced within the tradition of naturalism. His characters are seen as simple and “natural,” and in terms of habits, idioms, customs, and experience, Steinbeck is obviously on intimate terms with them. Thus if they are both simple and “natural” (an alleged unity of labels that many philosophers, particularly metaphysicians, have readily embraced), so must he be. As Österling and countless others have noted, the early Steinbeck was a writer of the land and its natural inhabitants, morally disposed to the preservation of nature’s integrity. He was, in his thinking and work, both a functional part of nature and a student/appreciator of nature. Yet he was no simple-minded sentimentalist (though he could be sentimental on other counts) or popularizing nature freak. His on-again, off-again university education and long collegial association with scientist and collector Ed Ricketts demonstrate that he was formally trained and experienced in the biological and marine sciences. But he superseded the inherent limits and understandings of science, complementing science with a deeply appreciative understanding of nature from aesthetic and philosophical perspectives.

In other words, Steinbeck’s naturalism was no simple, unidimensional matter. Nature for the scientist, the theologian, and the romantic may well be a rather clearly defined, unequivocal reality. But what becomes of nature, its conceptualization and presentation, in the hands of a passionate artist, trained scientist, spiritually inclined nonbeliever, occasional romantic and transcendentalist like Steinbeck? A closer look at naturalism is necessary, in both its literary and its philosophic formulations.

Although undoubtedly generalized, a useful standard account of “literary naturalism” is represented by the sort of received opinion found in the Oxford Companion to American Literature: “Naturalism, critical term applied to the method of literary composition that aims at a detached scientific objectivity in the treatment of natural man. . . . It conceives of man as controlled by his passions, or by his social and economic environment and circumstances . . . in this view, man has no free will” (cited in French John Steinbeck 1975, 37). “Literary naturalism,” thus defined, coincides with at least one pervasive aspect of “philosophical naturalism” as it has come to be conceived in the twentieth-century American context.' This version suggests that all instances of natural objects—a stone, a leaf, a horse, a human being—exist within spatiotemporal and causal orders. Persons, like rocks or oceans, are but one species of natural object and are no less subject to natural laws, in terms of the processes that, in the case of people, make up mental and social life, than any other parts of nature. Just as the scientist’s application of natural or scientific method to the explanation of volcanoes or the movement of planets is both appropriate and useful, so, too, does the same approach to persons explain what makes them work. Clearly, much of what we today understand in the realms of genetics, psychological conditioning, medicine, and human instinctual behavior, among other phenomena, is directly attributable to the assumptions and methods of this aspect of naturalism.

On such an account then, man and nature appear co-extensive, unified, compatible, and relatively harmonious in terms of operations and explanatory principles. Regarded in a literal sense, man is a determined, fully constituted unit of nature at the mercy of nature’s forces, its arbitrary and sometimes capricious doings. Man is substantially the sum product of natural factors—genetics, social conditioning, and, as the Greeks knew, even pure chance or fate (Moira). Inescapably, man is but one element among many interconnected elements within the system of nature—a discrete cog in the vast machine. Steinbeck articulated this fundamental insight when, in the Log from the Sea of Cortez, he summarized his cosmic worldview in these words: “All things are one thing and . . . one thing is all things—plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea, and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again” (LSC 257).

One might be tempted to say that nature, poetically or spiritually rendered, is man’s true source, an authentic home, a kindly, albeit amoral, friend and nurturer that treats persons neutrally rather than cruelly as other people all too often seem to do when they crave money or power over values. For instance, consider such ambivalent longings for nature as George and Lennie’s dream in Of Mice and Men of lasting solace on their never-to-be-realized couple of acres.
 (“An’ live off the fatta the lan’” [14]) or boy Jody’s desire in “The Red Pony” to be absorbed into the mysterious, comforting though scary mountains, those taller, darker Santa Lucias, “Curious secret mountains . . . when the sun had gone over the edge in the evening and the mountains were a purple-like despair, then Jody was afraid of them” (LV 242).

But yet another, complementary dimension of “philosophical naturalism” is also, it turns out, central to Steinbeck’s ideas about man and nature. Moreover, when we consider the claims of scholars such as Edwin H. Cady and Warren French (“Naturalism seems to fit only theoretical examples of a misguided theory”), this aspect of philosophical naturalism serves as a much-needed corrective to the narrow and impossible confines of literary naturalism (cited in Bloom 1987, 65). While it may well be that, from the scientist’s perspective, the natural universe as a whole operates according to neutral, indifferent forces of cause and effect, nature nonetheless contains within it unique value-bearing, value-creating, value-acting sorts of entities, namely, human beings.

Humans both have and constantly pursue values through deliberation and action. Though a distinctive biological unit within the natural order, man is never wholly reducible in any way to the other parts or categories of nature. Significantly, man is both the same and different. To the extent that human persons, unique in status and function, engage in acts of valuing they reflect at least a measure of free will, they become “moral” beings, and thus must accept responsibility for choices and actions. Among all the elements constitutive of nature, only man can and does rise up against determinism through an exercise of will and moral consciousness (notably a fundamental insight at the core of Jean-Paul Sartre’s magnum opus, Being and Nothingness).

As John J. Conder has pointed out, Steinbeck’s insistence on the two sides of the self—the species self integrated within nature, as over against the social self that inclines toward “mechanical man”—provides the ground for his “idiosyncratic way of harmonizing determinism and freedom.” Man’s (individual and group man) achievement of rational consciousness entails freedom and responsibility for actions. But there is more. In reflecting on The Grapes of Wrath, Conder suggests:

*Man’s possession of instinct roots him in nature [makes him part of nature], but he is different from other things in nature, as Steinbeck makes clear by describing in Chapter 14 man’s willing-

ness to “die for a concept” as the “one quality [that] is the foundation of Manself . . . distinctive in the universe.” And this emphasis on man’s uniqueness in nature, so inextricably related to his will, in turn limits the scope of the novel’s historical determinism.

(cited in Bloom 1988, 102-3)

Simply stated, determinism is tempered, though never completely overcome, by freedom.

My argument, then, regarding Steinbeck’s outlook, is basically a simple one, though it reflects profound philosophical insight. It extends Conder’s position full force into the realms of philosophical naturalism and existential choice. Steinbeck’s early work formulates and dramatically re-presents the two-sided and, at times, confounding version of philosophical naturalism precisely in his literary portrayal of the paradoxical nature of human existence, of man in nature. For Steinbeck, to be a human person is tantamount to being caught in a paradox, to be engaged, sometimes unwittingly, in living with and working through the dilemma of being at once both a determined unit of nature and a free, value-articulating individual forever called upon to act. In a vivid, existential sense, Steinbeck’s fiction thus articulates through art the “lived experience” of the complexities and paradoxes of naturalism.

So man is in fact both free and not free, an apparently unassailable truth about the human condition, a reality philosophers have labeled “soft determinism” as a counterbalance to inflexible “hard determinism.” In Steinbeck the blend is between his “scientific mechanism” and “humanistic vitalism” and follows logically from his empirically derived theory of “nonteleological thinking,” which concerns itself with what “is” the case rather than what “could,” “should,” or “might” be. As a determined product of environment, in the broadest sense, individuals sometimes cannot help themselves, cannot be or do otherwise.

It thus comes as no surprise that Steinbeck’s characters are often cast as though they are in an epical struggle with fickle nature or even their own uncontrollable passions and instincts. While a truthful claim about man and his condition, this alone could not suffice for Steinbeck, for it would imply that the characters, and their creator, the naturalistic writer, cannot attempt any moral judgments and must necessarily be inclined toward pessimism. Contrarily, in Steinbeck’s work we witness the intersection, the complementarity, of the determinism of nature and man’s freedom of existence, in other words, both scien-
Scientific “cause and effect” and nonteleological “is” thinking. Simplistic or reductionistic models of naturalism will not do, for they either bury man in nature or seek to separate him from it. Philosophically and aesthetically, Steinbeck can be both an environmental determinist, broadly construed, and a “humanist” whose characters illustrate strong ethical qualities of choice and action.

Over and against the at times overwhelming forces of nature and fate, many of Steinbeck’s early characters embody a compensating humanistic value that affirms the significance of the individual person no matter how lowly or seemingly ill equipped for the world. Man thus reveals a subtle kind of moral grandeur in his everyday life, in relations among common people such as gamblers, ranch hands, drunks, prostitutes, migrant laborers. Difficult though it may be, man can help himself through an act of will, thereby affirming the primacy of human dignity. In this respect, one cannot ignore Steinbeck’s affinity with the idealism of American transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman who tend to portray man as simultaneously individualistic and selflessly altruistic.

If the preceding is at all an accurate account, it is easy to see how for Steinbeck nature could be ambiguously conceived as both friend and enemy and, in turn, man himself variously celebrated for his courage and moral conquests (e.g., In Dubious Battle) and berated for his crass self-interest and sought-after superiority over nature (consider, e.g., the commercialization and abuse of the land and its people in The Grapes of Wrath). Man at times displays his freedom through moral grandeur and, at other times, through wanton hubris against the forces of nature that frustrate his ambitions. For a telling illustration, simply recall (in “The Red Pony”) boy Jody’s grandfather describing that “line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them” from their onward push to the west, from the “westering” that was their very modus operandi.

How is this hypothesis regarding Steinbeck’s vision of naturalism manifest in one of his early works? A brief summary of some key aspects of one early novel, Of Mice and Men (the work Peter Lisca has called “a symbolic construct of man’s psychological and spiritual as well as his social condition” [294]), provides further evidence for the argument here advanced. On the side of environmental determinism, consider the character Lennie. Obviously, his inherited mental defects and developmental experiences have cast him as something of a pawn of nature, a victim of forces he can never seem to control. Consequently, he lovingly squeezes the life out of every living creature that comes into his hands and paws at women’s clothing without fully realizing the meaning or consequences of his acts. By contrast his partner, George, is cast as the thinker, the decision maker, the caretaker of Lennie, and, I would argue, the ultimately free, moral agent who vividly illustrates the two aspects of Steinbeck’s naturalism. George is free to choose—indeed, in a sense, condemned to freedom—but he is, also, determined by powerful forces within himself and the world—his lusts, his original promise to Lennie’s aunt to look after him, his penchant for dreaming and fantasizing, his acquiescence to gambling and drink, and even, in the end, his overpowering love for Lennie.

In this vein, one of the earliest Steinbeck scholars, Harry Thornton Moore, was correct in pointing out that, regarding many of the characters in Of Mice and Men, “George and Lennie and Candy and Crooks and some of the others are caught in this situation, they are lonely and homeless and yearning.” But he was wrong in concluding that George is simply a shattered protagonist who goes down in spiritual defeat, a character “no more than pathetic” who “attracts sympathy because he has to lose his friend Lennie” (51). Surely, George’s dream is shattered, but he survives and goes on. Likewise, I disagree with Warren French’s assertion that, in the end, George “is helpless in the hands of an indifferent and imperfect nature” (cited in Bloom 1987, 76). Both miss the second, enhancing dimension of naturalism (and the second aspect of the self, in Conder’s terms), conceived philosophically, George chose; he acted in one way rather than another. He could simply have walked away and left Lennie to the mob, but he didn’t. Both interpreters ignore the intense moral dilemma and its courageous and sad, even heroic, resolution that distinguishes the ending of this powerful story. The conclusion Steinbeck presents is as fine an example as one can find in literature of the anguished, yet imperative, nature of moral choice. Choice is tough, and often all will not go well, but it must be done. Any self-reflective human being knows this before all else.

At the end of the tale, Lennie knows, as do we the readers, that he has again done wrong but that he can’t really help himself, can’t help what he is or will be in the future. George has, even through denial, always known this bitter truth. Lennie thinks George may finally abandon him, as well he should.
STEINBECK

(rationally speaking) in order to save his own skin. Along the quiet bank of the Salinas River, a refuge of comforting nature, the drama reaches fever pitch. There seems no way out. The lynchmen’s voices grow nearer and nearer. Deterministic fate closes in and seriously restricts the range of choices. Lennie and George are victims of harsh nature, of a destiny they had some hand in shaping but over which they now seem to have no control. But if nothing else—and, indeed, there is at that moment nothing else—they have each other, they can count on each other. The bond is both cementing and liberating. And then, through an heroic act of will, George demonstrates, with simple, unparalleled clarity, the transcendent power of love. In killing Lennie, thereby saving him from indignity and torture, George morally reverses (for the moment) the forces of fate and nature that have both of them in its grip. Nature controls and man is free. Hopelessness and courage exist side by side. Whichever way the pendulum swings is forever a part of the human drama, whether in art or in daily living.

In sum, the philosophical naturalism embodied in Steinbeck’s early and best fiction reflects an understanding of and faith in both nature and man. It is a complex and sophisticated outlook that can, in Socratic fashion, assist in greater self-understanding (the Delphic oracle’s most enduring command was “know thyself”) while, in an ecological sense, illuminating our often unconscious attitudes toward nature and cultivating appropriate responses to present and future environmental challenges. Without doubt Steinbeck’s ecological message—his desire to understand and cooperate with the environment rather than, like Hemingway, dominate it—was well ahead of its time. On this point, Steinbeck’s biographer, Jackson J. Benson, has remarked: “As early as the mid-1930s he [Steinbeck] was talking about man living in harmony with nature, condemning a false sense of progress, advocating love and acceptance, condemning the nearly inevitable use of violence, and preaching ecology at a time when not even very many scientists cared about it” (Benson 1988, 196). But as we know so painfully today, his pleas of almost sixty years ago fell on deaf ears. With hindsight, if Steinbeck’s ideas about man and nature, man in nature, had been heeded rather than disparaged as Martian-like talk—attacked politically and ideologically—would we today be confronting the very real possibility of environmental calamity in the coming decades?

For Steinbeck, man is not just a cultural or political or economic animal but fundamentally a species in nature, a unique and hopeful part of the whole and never detached from it. Man suffers and makes mistakes when he rejects his biological identity, and his suffering is too often inflicted on everything around him. We today would do well to embrace the character of the hard-nosed scientific as well as the religious and philosophical in his richest ideas. At his most poignant moments, Steinbeck engenders a powerful, though naively unappreciated, divinity about nature and particularly man, as captured in the following lines that serve to close this essay:

Why do we dread to think of ourselves as a species? Can it be that we are afraid of what we may find? That human self-love would suffer too much and that the image of God might prove to be a mask? This could be only partly true, for if we could cease to wear the image of a kindly, bearded, interstellar dictator, we might find ourselves true images of his kingdom, our eyes the nebulae, and universes in our cells.

(LSC 314)

Notes

Portions of this essay are included, but treated in a different context, in a previous paper of mine, “The Concept of Person in the Early Fiction of John Steinbeck,” which appeared in a special issue of Personalist Forum 3.1 (Spring 1992): 67-73.

1. Naturalism in America of course has deep roots in nineteenth-century philosophical and literary thought (i.e., Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman). Here I offer in my own words a brief summary of some leading ideas about naturalism as addressed in the writings of such historical figures as John Dewey, F. J. E. Woodbridge, and Sidney Hook and in the highly influential work by George Santayana, The Life of Reason. Cf. also Ernest Nagel, “Naturalism Reconsidered” (1954).

2. My position in this essay has also been shaped by study of chapter 14 of the Log from the Sea of Cortez (1951), both editions of Warren French’s Twayne book, John Steinbeck (1961, 1975), and the chapter “Some Conclusions,” in Peter Lisca’s The Wide World of John Steinbeck (1958).

Bibliography

Published Works by John Steinbeck

Editors’ Note: When possible, the works of John Steinbeck are cited from readily available paperback editions. Original dates of publication are included in the bibliographic entries.


Published Works About John Steinbeck


Other References


Louis Owens (essay date fall 2002)


[In the following essay, Owens responds to negative perceptions of Steinbeck’s works by offering a reading Of Mice and Men that emphasizes its strong thematic content (such as its arguments regarding eugenics) over its overt sentimentality—an aspect that has been a recurring issue for critics.]

In 1950, the eminent American man of letters Edmund Wilson dismissed Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath by writing, “[I]t is as if human sentiments and speeches had been assigned to a flock of lemmings on their way to throw themselves into the sea” (42). Thirty years later, in a New York Times hatchet job on Steinbeck that masqueraded as a review of two new biographies by Jackson Benson and Thomas Kiernan, Roger Sale launched what the reviewer must have considered a definitive strike against Steinbeck’s literary reputation, declaring that he “seems a writer without a source of strength” and sneering, “there is a story to be told here, which would stress how hollow Steinbeck’s dreams were, and how much he did with the little gift he had” (10). There have been a few champions of Steinbeck’s writing among academic and popular critics, such as Malcolm Cowley, who wrote of The Grapes of Wrath, “A whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence,” but voices such as Cowley’s have been in the minority to say the least and seldom found in the better universities (qtd. in Owens, John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America 128). And the overriding damnation has been one of sentimentality. Alfred Kazin in 1956 indicted Steinbeck for “moral serenity” and “calculated sentimentality” (qtd. in Hadella 19). Edwin Berry Burgum accused Steinbeck’s values of being “paralyzed in the apathy of the sentimental” (qtd. in Hadella 20).
A writer with such indestructible international popularity as Steinbeck deserves, perhaps, a closer scrutiny to see if such criticism is valid. Is Steinbeck guilty of “moral serenity and calculated sentimentality”? If so, then his popularity is perhaps easily explained by the mass of readers’ collective appetite for the simple and sentimental, a reality of lowbrow literary consumerism academic critics like to infer if not quite pronounce in the more egalitarian late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. If not, then is there more to his craft than Kazin and Wilson and company, along with the academy, have been inclined to notice?

*Of Mice and Men* is an ideal subject for such scrutiny, for despite being a Book of the Month Club selection and bestseller still read in virtually every high school in America and, with minimal adaptation by Steinbeck, winner of the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award as the best stage production of 1937, this novella has been a particular target for critics who decry sentimentality in literature. Typical is Freeman Champney, who, in the *Antioch Review*, declared that “*Of Mice and Men* is little else besides a variation on the theme ‘every man kills the thing he loves’” (qtd. in Hadella 20). Still another critic accused Steinbeck of being “embarrassingly sentimental and cheaply trite” (qtd. in Hadella 20).

*Of Mice and Men* was written to be simultaneously a readable play and a stageable novel, an experiment that Steinbeck himself described as “a tricky little thing designed to teach me to write for the theater” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 132). The tricky little novel was first performed directly from the text, with no playscript, by the Theatre Union in San Francisco in the spring and summer of 1937 and then, after being adapted for stage by Steinbeck and George S. Kaufman, opened on Broadway in November 1937, with 80 percent of the novel’s lines going into the playscript unchanged. The novel’s protagonists, George and Lennie, are itinerant farm workers who travel around together. George is small, wiry, tough, and smart, while Lennie is a powerful giant with the intellectual and social development of a toddler. George takes care of Lennie, Lennie works hard for the two of them, and together they share a dream that creates a deep bond, the dream of owning their own farm and no longer being alienated from the product of their work or from themselves.

The cast of the novel, in addition to the dual protagonists, is simple. At the top of the ranch hierarchy is “the boss,” who makes only a marginal appearance. In the novel, this character is referred to only as “the boss,” with no further explanation, but in the playscript Steinbeck underscores his position by having George ask, “Boss the owner?” to which the old swamper, Candy, replies, “Naw! Superintendent. Big land company” (qtd. in Hadella 65). Next in line is the boss’s bad son, Curley, who suffers from a clichéd little-man’s complex and wants to beat up big guys. Also living in the ranch’s big house is Curley’s wife, who yearns pathetically for meaningful recognition as a human being and therefore drives Curley mad with fear he will lose his most valued possession. The ranch foreman, Slim, is an omnipotent and omniscient sort of Nietzschean superman, who, as Steinbeck writes,

> moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch. . . . There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. . . . His hatched face was ageless. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought. His hands, large and lean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer.

At one point, George looks at Slim and sees “the calm, Godlike eyes fastened on him” (40). Slim, as Steinbeck writes him, calls to mind Nietzsche’s description of übermenschen: Goethe, a man who has “disciplined himself into wholeness, [who] created himself” and became “the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength . . . a spirit who has become free” (Kaufman 278). Throughout the novel, Slim is depicted in near priestly terms. He appears to represent infinite justice and wisdom and is an ascetic, beyond sex, beyond temptation by Curley’s wife, by Curley’s violence, or by the ordinary weaknesses of life. Unlike all of the other characters, he seems unaffected by loneliness or the transcendent homesickness that haunts the novel. Slim is also the familiar American cowboy hero: solitary, stoic, above common needs and desires, serving out justice from his God-like, intuitive sense of right and wrong.

Next in the apparent hierarchy of the ranch is Carlson, a powerfully built and surly subordinate to Slim. Then comes Candy, an aging and crippled farmhand on the verge of being utterly useless, and Crooks, the Black stable hand with a twisted back and properly bitter perspective on the White world surrounding
him. On this California farm George and Lennie’s dream takes a cropper when Lennie kills Curley’s wife and, in a final, intensely lachrymose scene, George shoots his best friend while intoning the words of their shared dream. We all cry. It’s a heartbreaking, sentimental story.

In this reading of *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie share an impossible dream, a version of the Jeffersonian agrarian dream of a piece of land—the American Dream—but more significantly a dream of brotherhood in a fallen world where we are all the children of Cain marked for our sins and set against one another in this last place to the east of the lost Eden. In a fallen Garden where men and women drift past one another alone and infinitely lonely, George and Lennie at least have each other, and together they symbolize humanity’s inescapable need to be connected, to touch another human being profoundly in some inarticulate way. George and Lennie have what Curley’s wife, Candy, and Crooks all long for: meaningful human contact, something like love. When George shoots Lennie, George is not only killing his dream, but more importantly he is acting as his brother’s keeper, making the ultimate, and ultimately heroic, gesture of sacrifice and responsibility. As I wrote in my 1985 book, *John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America*, “Cain’s question is the question again at the heart of this novel: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ And the answer... is an unmistakable confirmation” (101). Slim, the God-like foreman of the ranch, validates George’s heroic action when he sits down close to George and says, “You hadda, George. I swear you hadda” (104).

In this reading of the novel, Lennie may be read as something of a primal innocent, as Slim suggests when he tells George, “He’s jes’ like a kid, ain’t he,” and George answers, “Sure he’s jes’ like a kid. There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he’s so strong” (43). Curley’s wife tells Lennie, “You’re nuts. . . . But you’re a kinda nice fella. Jus’ like a big baby,” and half a page later we read, “And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck” (88, 89). Candy sums it up when they find her body: “He’s such a nice fella. I didn’t think he’d do nothing like this” (92). Lennie dies because he can’t function in society. All he seeks is the same thing everyone seeks: human connection, warmth. This is what drives every character in the book, including Curley’s poor wife. Pathos results from the novella’s illumination of our human inability to transcend aloneness and loneliness. In this reading, George is the modernist hero, the little man who makes the only gesture of control possible by sacrificing what he will lose anyway, a bit like Jake sending Brett off to sleep with Romero in *The Sun Also Rises*, or Quentin drowning his shadow in *The Sound and the Fury*. Readers love a good heartrending fiction. Thus, read, this novel might well strike many of us as what Kazin called “calculated sentimentality,” designed to leave its readers emotionally moved but certainly not intellectually or morally challenged (309). If this were the only story here, we would be forced to surrender Steinbeck to the anti-sentimental mob storming the literary castle. But there are other more interesting novels to be found in *Of Mice and Men*.

A non-teleological reading of *Of Mice and Men* can evoke a quite different kind of story, not a sentimental one at all. In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (published originally in 1941 as *Sea of Cortez*), Steinbeck and his friend Edward F. Ricketts define what they called non-teleological thinking as a non-causal and non-blaming viewpoint (110). Steinbeck had begun to investigate this kind of viewpoint as early as his second novel, *To a God Unknown* (1933), and he had developed it further in *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *In Dubious Battle* (1936). His method of incorporating non-teleological thinking into his fiction in the first two of these works was to construct surface plots that lead the reader to draw erroneous teleological conclusions: in *To a God Unknown*, Joseph Wayne sacrifices himself and brings rain to a parched land; in *Pastures* there is a curse that destroys lives in an Eden-like valley.

Steinbeck’s working title for *Of Mice and Men* was “Something that Happened.” Reading the novel through this title, in a non-blaming or non-causal way, Lennie’s murder of Curley’s wife and his death at George’s hands are part of something that just happens. No one is to blame. The brutal facts are that Lennie Small was born too small in mental and emotional range and too large in physical dimension, and he is dangerous. It is not Lennie’s fault that he kills mice, puppies, and vulnerable young women. He is incapable of the kind of control that would prevent such awful things from happening because he was born that way. He is indeed a “baby” or a “kid,” and he ain’t mean. But he’s dangerous. In this reading, Lennie is an accident of nature, born with something missing. No one is to blame for the fact that Lennie kills things, and no one is to blame for Lennie’s inability to survive within society. Society is not to blame when it rids itself of that which endangers it. It’s a simple thing, not a tragedy. There’s nothing more terrifying to contemplate than a giant toddler
set loose upon the world. If they’d gotten the dream farm, Lennie would have killed the rabbits. He would have killed the neighbors.

The opening and closing scenes of *Of Mice and Men* are nearly identical. Each scene takes place beside a pool in the Salinas River, as evening is coming on. In the opening scene, two men—George and Lennie—walk down a trail to the pool. In the final scene, two men—George and Slim—walk up the same trail away from the pool. In both scenes, a little snake with a periscope head swims across the still pool. There seems to be perfect balance between beginning and end; nothing has really changed. However, in the novel’s final scene, a heron stands motionless in the pool, and “[a] silent head and beak lanced down and plucked [the water snake] out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically” (96). We cannot read tragedy into the little snake’s frantic death, just as we should not read tragedy into Lennie’s death. That’s just the way life is. A paragraph after the demise of the water snake, we find that “[a] nother little water snake swim up the pool, turning its periscope head from side to side” (96). Just as one little snake replaces another, Slim has replaced Lennie as George’s friend, and surely Slim will be a more practical friend than the lumbering, deadly Lennie. Nothing has really changed. Something happened, that’s all. Steinbeck has carefully neutralized the lachrymose sentimentalism of the previous reading.

Critics have offered other readings of this novel, including quite persuasive Jungian analyses. Steinbeck was acquainted with Joseph Campbell, who had hung out at Ricketts’s laboratory on Cannery Row and even read and commented upon a draft of *To a God Unknown*—undoubtedly affecting revision of that wasteland novel—and Steinbeck read Jung and even wrote a cleverly Jungian story called *The Snake.* It is not difficult at all to read Lennie as George’s “shadow-self” and Curley’s wife as his “anima” in Jungian terms, as critics have done (see Haddell 52-55). At the same time, it is hard to avoid a sociopolitical reading of this novel that falls between Steinbeck’s exploration of Communist Party organized labor strife in *In Dubious Battle* and the great call for social change that would be *The Grapes of Wrath.* In such a reading, the ranch is a microcosm of capitalist America. The boss is not the owner but a superintendent. The novel’s characters are nothing more than capital used to generate profit. Slim is a version of Owen Wister’s famous Virginian, a factotum who implements the will of the corporate owners. The ranch hands are used up, and when they are no longer useful, like Candy’s dog, they are disposed of.

Crooks, the Black “stable buck” as he’s called, is an animated reminder of America’s slave-holding economy, his twisted back evidence of the human cost of that economy. The fact that Crook’s family once possessed a farm identical to the dream farm George and Lennie yearn for underscores his commonality with these men who are fodder for the machine, but the volume of the California civil code for 1905 that sits on Crook’s shelf testifies to his awareness of difference. Just as Candy expects to be fired soon because of his age and lost hand—a significant liability for someone who is a “hired hand”—Crooks will soon be disposed of because of his age and damaged back. Crooks links his fate to that of Candy’s dog when he says, “They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me,” and he does the same for Lennie when he tells him that if George doesn’t come back, “They’ll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog” (67, 70). Should we miss this message of bondage, Steinbeck fills the novel with the rattling of halter chains from offstage. Curley’s nameless wife, with her “sausage” curls and red “mules,” is defined as property, nameless except as property. “Well, ain’t she a looloo?” one of the ranch hands says, and we should not be surprised to find that the foreman’s puppy-producing dog is called Lulu. Curley’s wife is equated with the other chattel of the ranch, including the most powerless of the workers. It is Curley’s wife who unconsciously clarifies Lennie’s value in this world when she calls him a “Machine.” Lennie is a profit-making machine valuable until it malfunctions, when it must be gotten rid of. In this reading, George “uses” Lennie, and there is a hierarchy of those who use and are used.

Thus far, we can legitimately find not only the sentimental novel critics have decried, but also a Jungian novel critics have delighted in probing, and a very political novel befitting Steinbeck’s reputation as social critic or author of what has been erroneously called social realism. There is, however, yet a still more interesting reading of this little novel, a reading that begins to open up when we consider the various deaths that punctuate the story.

The first victims we become aware of are the puppies that Slim drowns. In Slim’s first scene, we learn that his bitch, Lulu, has “slung” nine pups the night before, as he puts it. “I drowned four of ‘em right off,” he tells George. “She couldn’t feed that many. . . . I
kept the biggest” (35). Immediately, Carlson begins agitating for Slim to give Candy one of the pups so that they can shoot Candy’s old dog. “That dog of Candy’s is so God damn old,” Carlson says, “he can’t hardly walk. Stinks like hell, too” (35). It becomes quickly apparent that Candy’s dog’s major sin is stinking. “I can smell that dog a mile away,” Carlson complains, adding later, “He don’t have no fun. . . . And he stinks to beat hell!” (35, 44). To give his argument the kind of humanitarian bent euthanasia proponents prefer, he says, “Well, you ain’t bein’ kind to him keepin’ him alive” (44). Despite Carlson’s argument, there is no evidence that the old dog is unhappy or suffering terribly as he lies faithfully by Candy’s bed. The truth is he’s simply an annoyance—he stinks—and he’s too old to be useful, though we’re told that he was a great sheep dog in his prime. Carlson turns to the God-like Slim for the final judgment, and Steinbeck writes, “The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘You can have a pup if you want to. . . . Carl’s right, Candy. That dog ain’t no good to himself. I wish somebody’d shoot me if I got old an’ a cripple”’ (45). It isn’t difficult to imagine how Candy, who is old and crippled himself, might react to Slim’s declaration—he’s probably wondering if Slim will shoot him next. To make sure the reader places ultimate responsibility for the dog’s fate with Slim, Steinbeck adds, “Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim’s opinions were law” (45). Then again, just before the dog is led away for execution, Steinbeck writes, “Candy looked a long time at Slim to try to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none” (47).

We don’t have to accept Slim’s rationale for dowing four puppies. Of course the mother could have fed all nine, since dogs have been doing such things for millennia. However, had Slim allowed nine to live, the biggest and most valuable of the litter might not have become even bigger and more valuable. Slim was simply practicing a kind of Social Darwinism, assisting natural selection. And of course we don’t have to accept either Carlson’s or Slim’s rationale for the execution of Candy’s dog. The old dog was simply unproductive and unpleasant, an impediment to the smooth functioning of the bunkhouse and ranch society. There are other unproductive and therefore relatively valueless inhabitants of the ranch, of course, as Curley’s wife suggests when she enters Crooks’ room after Curley and George and the others have gone to town. Looking at Lennie and Candy and Crooks, she says, “They left all the weak ones here” (75). The fact that she, too, has been left behind and is drawn to the fight of Crooks’s room implicates her profoundly in this company of the doomed.

No one who reads Of Mice and Men can possibly miss the parallels between the shooting of Candy’s dog and Lennie’s execution by George. Steinbeck first makes sure that Carlson describes exactly how he will shoot the old dog and then shows George shooting Lennie in exactly the same way with the same gun. The unmistakable message is that dog and man are both annoyances and impediments to the smooth working of the ranch. One stinks and one kills too many things. But why shoot Lennie, with precisely the same weapon in precisely the same way? One reading would have us believe that Lennie’s death is inevitable or that George is saving Lennie from a fate worse than death. When the body of Curley’s wife is discovered, Slim tells George, “I guess we gotta get ‘im” (94). George pleads with body language against what is implicit in Slim’s words. Steinbeck writes, “George stepped close. ‘Couldn’t we maybe bring him in an’ they’ll lock him up?’” But just as he would give Candy’s dog no reprieve, Slim denies George this hope, replying, “An’ s’pose they lock him up an’ strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain’t no good, George” (94). Clearly, Slim is telling George that Lennie has to die. He is making the decision that Lennie is better off dead, just as he did with Candy’s dog. Slim is playing God.

Of Mice and Men is an extraordinarily efficient and carefully crafted little book in which every word, every sound, every nuance matters, from the off-stage clanging of horseshoes to the slant of light across the bunk-house doorway. However, one glaring bit of questionable writing stands out. Why, one wonders, does Steinbeck feel it necessary to repeat the name of Carlson’s gun so many times? When Carlson offers to shoot the old dog, Candy says hopefully, “You ain’t got no gun.” Carlson replies, “The hell I ain’t. Got a Luger” (47). Later, after they find Curley’s wife’s body, Carlson says, “I’ll get my Luger.” Then on the same page, Steinbeck writes, “Carlson came running in. ‘The bastard’s stole my Luger,’ he shouted” (94). Fourteen lines later, Curley says, “He got Carlson’s Luger” (95). Seven pages later, when George shoots Lennie, we read, “He reached in his side pocket and brought out Carlson’s Luger” (102). Why repeat the name of the gun several times in such rapid succession that the repetition stands out glaringly?
To refresh my memory about the dangers and uses of repetition, I consulted James A. Heffeman and John E. Lincoln’s *Writing: A College Handbook*, a text I used in a classroom at UC Davis in 1982 and for some unfathomable reason still have on my shelves. Looking up “repetition” in the index, I found this: “How do you emphasize your main point? . . . [T]he two most important ways of emphasizing a point are repetition and arrangement. . . . You may have been told that you should never repeat a word or phrase when you write, that you should scour your brain or your thesaurus for synonyms to avoid using a word or phrase again. This is nonsense. If repetition gets out of control, it will soon become monotonous and boring. But selective repetition can be highly useful” (108). “This selective repetition keeps the eye of the reader on the writer’s main point” (109).

Why would Steinbeck want to keep the reader’s eye not just on a gun but specifically on a Luger pistol? The Luger has an interesting history. As a gun collector’s note puts it, “Without a doubt, the Luger semiautomatic pistol is one of the most famous firearms of the twentieth century.” And of course it is famous for its association with the German military in both World War I and World War II. The Luger pistol was named for its designer, Georg Luger, in Karlsruhe, Germany, at the end of the nineteenth century. Following modification, the 1904 Luger became the weapon of choice for the German Navy and Army; and after 1904 “German military sales accounted for the vast majority of Lugers ever produced” (“History” n.p.). “The Luger was the standard German side arm throughout World War I. Luger production continued sporadically during the post-war period, in part due to restrictions on German arms manufacture imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The allies permitted official production to begin again in 1925 at Simson and company. Simson, however, was owned by Jews, and the company was liquidated when the Nazis came into power. The Luger manufacturing machinery was purchased by Krieghoff. Mauser purchased . . . Luger manufacturing machinery in 1929, and produced Lugers until the later part of World War II” (Chapman n.p.). Here is a professional description of this famous gun:

The Luger is a fairly complicated pistol, requiring quite a bit of precision hand-fitting to manufacture, and tight tolerances between parts. These things contribute to its accuracy, but detract from reliability. Even for its time, the Luger was considered complex, expensive, large, and powerful. These factors limited civilian sales especially, given the ubiquity of small, cheap Browning-style pistols. Ultimately, even for military applications, more reliable and cheaper pistols replaced it. Even a little dirt on the exposed parts of the firing mechanism on the left side can cause failure to function.

(Chapman n.p.)

Why would a ranch hand own such a delicate and expensive gun and keep it under his bunk? It would very likely have to have been a trophy from World War I, though there’s nothing to indicate that Carlson is a veteran, and the novel contains no allusions to that war. It seems likely that Steinbeck wanted to associate Carlson and the gun that kills both dog and man with Germany. If we pursue that line of thought, it is interesting to note that the name “Carl” not only echoes the name of the town in which the Luger was created, Karlsruhe, but also derives from the Old High German word “karal,” a peasant or bondman ranking below a thane. The thane was a warrior, follower, one of the class of free servants attendant upon a lord. If we apply this hierarchy to the novel, Slim would be the thane who carries out the will of “the boss” and Carlson the bondman, the churlish muscle of the ranch. Steinbeck, a student of old and middle English and translator of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* into American English and, as his biographer Jack Benson called him, a polymath, would very likely have known this. Steinbeck loved this kind of play in his fiction, as can be seen even in such a light book as the 1954 novella *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, where he places his protagonist in a house on Avenue de Marigny to subtly remind those of us who may happen to know the history of the name of Enguerrand de Marigny, the royal chamberlain and principal minister of finance to Philip IV of France, the monarch primarily responsible for the destruction of the Templars, history that plays a significant role in the deep structure of that novel (Owens, “Steinbeck’s ‘Deep Dissembler’” 252). Steinbeck was a voracious reader, student of history, and sharp political observer.

It’s probably obvious by now that I’m attempting to lead you toward the theme of eugenics and its association with Fascism in this novel, a reading that may admittedly seem to stretch the fabric of the text a bit. But consider these questions and the pattern they suggest: Did Slim really have to drown those puppies? Did they really have to shoot Candy’s dog? Did George really have to shoot Lennie? Slim’s dog could have raised nine puppies, though they might have all been less impressive specimens. Candy’s dog could have been given a bath and allowed to sleep in the bunkhouse, or Candy could have kept the old dog in the barn, where only poor Crooks would have
smelled him. Finally, as George suggests, there is no reason at all that Lennie could not have been locked up where he wouldn’t be able to accidentally kill things. None of these deaths had the inevitability the novel pretends to imply.

In 1936, when Steinbeck was writing his experimental novella, most Americans did not know much about circumstances in Germany, even though the concentration camp at Dachau had opened as early as 1933, followed a few months later by Buchenwald. In July of 1933, the Nazis had passed a law allowing for the forced sterilization of those found by a Heredity Court to have genetic defects. In November of that same year, they passed a “Law against Habitual and Dangerous Criminals,” allowing beggars, homeless, alcoholics, and the chronically unemployed to be interned in concentration camps. In June of 1935, laws were passed allowing for forced abortions to prevent hereditary diseases from being passed on. Meanwhile, outside of Germany, the Euthanasia Legalization Society, later to be called the Euthanasia Society, was founded in England in 1935, and the Euthanasia Society of America in 1938. Eugenics was very much in the air on both sides of the Atlantic at this time. According to Benson, Steinbeck’s fascination with the idea of what he called the “phalanx,” or groupman, came partly “out of discussions with Ed [Ricketts] about the theories of W. C. Allee, the University of Chicago biologist,” and Steinbeck was also reading John Elof Boodin at the same time in the early thirties (267). In the summer of 1933, Steinbeck showed a short essay titled “Argument of Phalanx” to his friend Dick Albee, an essay articulating Steinbeck’s concept of what he called “group-man.” In his biography, Benson writes:

In recalling the background for “Argument of Phalanx,” Albee noted the importance of the fact that the early thirties was a time when mass movements were much discussed. . . . Many watched and discussed the progress of the Soviet Union and thought of it as a possible model, and at the same time, of course, Hitler was leading another mass socialist movement in Germany. Here, strikes, veterans’ marches, protest rallies, and other mass demonstrations were commonplace news. That Steinbeck was now keenly aware of all of this activity, at home and abroad, is clear from his many references to such movements in his letters of the period. The transformation of Germany was perhaps one of the most dramatic contemporary examples available to Steinbeck, and he wrote Book [Sheffield in 1933]: “Think of the impulse which has suddenly made Germany overlook the natures of its individuals and become what it has. Hitler didn’t do it. He merely speaks about it.”

(269-70)

Nine days later, on June 30, 1933, Steinbeck would write to Sheffield to say,

The investigations have so far been gratifying. I find that in Anthropology, Doctor Ellsworth Huntington, in History and cultural aspects, Spengler and Ouspenski, in folk lore and in unconscious psychology, Jung, in economic phases of anthropology, Briffault, in biology, Allee, and in physics, Shondringer, Planck, Bohr, Einstein, Heisenberg have all started heading in the same direction. None has gone far, and none apparently is aware of the work of the others, but each one is headed in the same direction and the direction is toward my thesis.

(Benson 270)

Obviously, drawn to the subject by his growing obsession with his “phalanx” theory, Steinbeck was paying close attention to events in Europe in the early thirties, at a time when most Americans weren’t aware of the darkest realities of Nazi Germany. We also know that Steinbeck had been reading Darwin exhaustively but also writers such as Booodin, W. C. Allee, Mark Braubard, William Emerson Ritter, and Ellsworth Huntington, all of whom deal with eugenics in their writings, even if only to repudiate it. Ritter, in his 1919 book The Unity of the Organism, according to Kevin Hearle, goes so far as to blame German social Darwinists for World War I (322-23), while Huntington, in Civilization and Climate (1924), makes claims for racial superiority and “issues a call to eugenic action” (Hearle 251). Hearle finds the direct influence of the “racialized discourse” of these authors in Steinbeck’s writings on the displaced migrants in California in the thirties, particularly in his 1938 essays collected as Their Blood Is Strong, which would lay the groundwork for The Grapes of Wrath.

Based on the reading we know he did, Steinbeck was clearly aware of the widespread eugenics movement, which as early as 1873 had seen a call in Fraser’s Magazine in England for the “‘gifted class’ to consider those of ‘inferior . . . moral, intellectual, and physical qualities’ as ‘enemies to the State’” if these inferior classes continue to breed (Galton, qtd. in Medawar 87). And based on his awkward repetition of the word “Luger,” in Of Mice and Men, it would seem that he wanted his reader to associate the supposed “mercy killings” of the novel with the rise of Fascism in Germany.
In the end, this reading takes us far afield from the sentimentalism of our first reading. This version of the novel is neither heartbreaking nor a boldly objective rendering of non-teleological reality; nor is it a call for social action to better the lives of American workers. Rather, in this version of the novel, Steinbeck is laying out a cautionary tale deeply engaged with the profound human crisis of his times. In Of Mice and Men’s final scene, George sits despondently beside his friend’s body, and Steinbeck writes, “Slim came directly to George and sat down beside him, sat very close to him. ‘Never you mind,’ said Slim. ‘A guy got to sometimes’” (104). Slim is clearly displacing Lennie, who in the novel’s opening scene sat “close to George.” But more interestingly here, in Slim’s words, Steinbeck removes the killing of Lennie from the status of an isolated event and places it in a pattern of behavior, something that a guy has to do sometimes, like the drowning of puppies or shooting of old dogs. After Slim once again validates George’s action by saying, “You hadda, George. I swear you hadda,” Slim adds, “Come on with me,” and the two walk up the same trail that George and Lennie had walked down in the novel’s first scene.

I believe that when he says, “Come on with me,” Slim is inviting George into a new belief system, an altered way of viewing the world. Aiming up the trail toward the highway, symbolically George and Slim are moving out into the world, a kind of prophet and apostle of a new order, as if George has come into Slim’s world to be purged of what Lennie represents, changed, and sent forth to do God’s work, as Slim defines it. There’s not much sentimental about that particular story.

Notes

1. Louis Owens submitted this essay to Susan Shillinglaw, editor of Steinbeck Studies, shortly before his sudden death in July 2002. Shillinglaw kindly suggested joint publication with Western American Literature. We publish this essay with gratitude for his generosity to colleagues and students and for his discerning writing, in many genres, about the fluidity of seemingly impenetrable boundaries.

2. Louis Owens read this essay at Davis and was scheduled to read it at the Steinbeck Centennial Conference at Hofstra University. It was to be part of a larger work, a revision of his book on John Steinbeck. Before his death, he agreed to have this essay published in Steinbeck Studies, and Western American Literature is publishing the essay jointly with San Jose State University. Louis Owens did not complete his notes before his death. We have been unable to locate the source of this quote because Walter Kaufman wrote numerous books about and translations of Nietzsche.

3. Benson points out that Steinbeck read reprints of Boodin lectures on such subjects as “The Existence of Social Minds” and “Functional Realism,” as well as Boodin’s books A Realistic Universe and Cosmic Evolution and others (268). Steinbeck would later ask Boodin for permission “to use some of his philosophy in his own work” (Benson 269).

Works Cited


Lesley Broder (essay date 2003)


[in the following essay, Broder contends that Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men divides women into two categories, nurturers or “trouble,” with the second category most acutely represented by the lonely, doomed figure of Curley’s wife.]

Of Mice and Men portrays the desperation people experienced during the Depression. The novel is set in rural California, and Steinbeck presents people of different ages, races, abilities, and classes, all of whom are subject to isolation. Although loneliness is inescapable in Soledad, as the name of the town suggests, Curley’s wife especially suffers because she is the only woman on a ranch where women are treated as nothing more than sexual objects. She therefore develops tactics for surviving loneliness that are markedly different from those used by the men who surround her.

From the outset, women are categorized loosely as either nurturing or troublesome. Lennie, a mentally retarded individual, has fond memories of his Aunt Clara, who took care of him and entrusted his welfare to George before her death. She is the only maternal representation of women; more often women are cast as conduits to misfortune for men. George and Lennie have been forced to find employment in Soledad because a woman at their former job accused Lennie of rape when he tried to feel her dress. Later, George spends the money he is saving for a ranch on prostitutes. Portrayed only as objects of entertainment and forces of destruction, women repeatedly distract men from their goals.

Curley’s wife further adds to this portrayal. Entirely devoid of company, she is the one character who remains nameless. The men acknowledge nothing about her true being, but merely that she is married to the boss’s son. She wanders the ranch asking for Curley and using her sexuality to get attention. When Lennie and George first meet Curley’s wife, she is described unequivocally in sexual terms.

She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. . . . Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. . . . She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward. (31)

Since her husband pays little attention to her and she has no occupation or friends, to fight desolation she must use her sexual appeal among the ranch hands, whose male camaraderie plainly excludes her.

George puts Curley’s wife into the category of “trouble” by warning Lennie that “They’s gonna be a bad mess about her. She’s a jail bait all set on the trigger” (51). Curley’s wife is sensitive to this kind of rejection. When the Black ranch handyman, Crooks, and his white counterpart, Candy, gather with Lennie in the barn, she wants their company and tries to flirt with them. The men respond coolly to her advances and ask that she leave. Discomfited, she responds, “If I catch any one man, and he’s alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an’ you won’t talk. . . . Think I don’t like to talk to somebody ever’ once in a while?” (77). Furious and desperate, she attacks each man viciously, but sensing his vulnerability she threatens Crooks in particular: “I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny” (81). Invoking her husband’s power when her charms do not work, Curley’s wife also draws force from the prevailing racist notion of which laborer she—an utterly powerless white female—could attempt to dominate.

In addition to suffering loneliness as the men do, Curley’s wife also lives off dreams as they do. While seducing Lennie, she speaks to him about her unspent potential and a man who wanted to make her a movie star. “Says I was a natural. Soon’s he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it” (88). When this man did not fulfill his promise, she married Curley. In all her dreams, men provide salvation and joy, for happiness is not something she can attain for herself. Ironically and pitifully, the sexuality she uses to cope with her lost dreams results in her death as Lennie pets her hair, then panics and snaps her neck just as Curley’s wife confides her cherished fantasies.

Upon her death, Lennie is hunted for destroying Curley’s property; thus Curley’s wife’s death makes
George and Lennie’s dream of owning land impossible. Predictably, Curley’s wife, like the prostitute George visits, serves to lead men astray. As such, Curley’s wife is often compared to Eve: unintentionally, her actions bring about the fall of paradise, or in this case, the dream of paradise. While the men mourn the end of their own dream, they have remained oblivious to Curley’s wife’s fantasies, the dreams she could not easily share with the male companions who so readily dismiss her.

By examining the character of Curley’s wife, students may consider what happens when women submerge their identity in that of another person. Additionally, Of Mice and Men reinforces the idea that women without access to other forms of power often use sexuality to get what they need from men. Students can debate the legitimacy of this: Was Curley’s wife to blame for her own death? Did Curley’s wife have any other recourse than using her beauty for attention? This subject can lead to a controversial discussion of date rape or the criminalization of prostitution. Those sympathizing with Curley’s wife may also see the destructive effects of judging women solely on appearances, and the sometimes dire consequences women face when they flaunt their sexuality. If Steinbeck’s novel were paired with Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, students could further discuss how another lonely woman, Mayella Ewell, uses her sexuality for attention and how this affects an entire town in rural Alabama.

Alienation rings through every page of this short novel. Each character faces the loneliness caused by unmet needs and miserable circumstances. Until her conversation with Lennie, Curley’s wife is alone in a hostile world. While the men actively work toward realizing their dreams, Curley’s wife has no way even to imagine executing her plans, however unrealistic they may be. Her lost dreams become, perhaps, the most poignant dreams of all because she has no one with whom to share them, except in the moments preceding her death. Like her fantasies, Curley’s wife herself is cut down without ever having had a chance to develop.

Work Cited

Peter L. Hays (essay date June 2004)


[In the following essay, Hays studies Steinbeck’s three experimental novels—Of Mice and Men, In Dubious Battle, and Burning Bright—pointing out that they incorporate stylistic and narrative elements of both plays and fiction, resulting, he suggests, in a more fabulist and abstract tone than the author’s other, more realistically-based novels.]

John Steinbeck wrote three novellae-plays—Of Mice and Men, The Moon Is Down, and Burning Bright—as experiments in a new form of drama. He was concerned that too few people saw plays and that the ideas expressed in them would therefore not be widely disseminated; moreover few people read plays, stumbling over stage directions. His experiments were novellas that consisted of description, dialogue, and action—no extensive history of a locale or interior monologue—thus the story itself could be played, being lifted from the book, the description guiding the set designer, the dialogue spoken, the action portrayed. In this paper I will talk only about the plays Steinbeck himself wrote, not the adaptations of his work by others. Of Mice and Men ran for 207 performances, winning the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, beating out Wilder’s Our Town for the prize; The Moon Is Down ran for 71 performances, Burning Bright for just 13. Whatever else hindered their success (and the novel form of The Moon Is Down had great success overseas as a work about resistance during the war and in occupied countries afterward) one factor was their increasing degree of abstraction and didacticism. Although Steinbeck’s work is grounded to a greater or lesser extent in realism, in these works he is essentially a fabulist, a writer of parables or fables with morals. In his desire to convey a general message, he progressively diminishes stories of individuals, making the characters in his plays into types and thus harder to identify with.

John O’Hara was hired to adapt In Dubious Battle (1936) for the stage and failed, but said that Steinbeck should consider writing drama: O’Hara considered him, as Curley’s wife would have phrased it, a natural. Steinbeck tried to adapt In Dubious Battle himself but didn’t like the result and discarded it. Thereafter he wrote a friend that “I’m going into training to write for the theater. . . . I have some ideas for a new dramatic form which I’m experimenting with” (Benson 327). However, he wrote the novella of Of Mice and Men (1937) first, writing a
novel of “description-dialog-action” (Goldhurst 49). After the novel was done, he turned it into a play with George Kaufman’s help, expanding the role of Curley’s wife. Stark Young’s *New Republic* review of the play “appreciated the stylized quality of the melodrama, and understood that Steinbeck was not attempting anything like realism. What he had created, in both novel and play versions, was a type of morality play” (Parini 195).

But Young is wrong. Unlike his two subsequent plays, *Of Mice and Men*, however much a parable, is grounded in reality. It’s based on labor Steinbeck did; in the summer of 1922 he had worked on a Spreckels Sugar Company ranch near Chualar along with Mexican, Filipino, and bindlestiff labor. As he later told an interviewer, as *Of Mice and Men* was running on Broadway:

> I was a bindlestiff myself for quite a spell. I worked in the same country that the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. (New York *Times* May 12, 1937, p. 7; quoted in Benson 364, who questions Steinbeck’s veracity.)

Even the landscape is based on reality. While Steinbeck may have heightened the idyllic nature of the riverside oasis, and purposefully placed in it a water snake to remind us of the snake in Eden, and moved the locale from Chualar to Soledad to emphasize the solitude (which “Soledad” means in Spanish) of homeless wanderers, he describes, in the novel, a landscape he knew:

> A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to a hillside bank. . . . On one side of the river the golden foothill slope curves up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green . . . and sycamores. . . . There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from ranches to swim in the deep pool and beaten hard by tramps. . . . In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires. . . .

The play reduces this to “A sandy bank of the Salinas River sheltered with willows—one giant sycamore up R. . . . A sparrow is singing. There is a distant sound of ranch dogs barking aimlessly and one clear quail call” (?). Thus the play focuses on George and Lennie and their plight (and that of Candy, Crooks, and Curley’s wife), dispensing with local history and the implication that what George and Lennie will suffer has been endured by other tramps before them. But even the curtailed stage description does insist on some “local color”: willows, sycamore, ranch dogs, quail.

The play makes clear its theme of the need of humans for each other, not just of biological interdependence but also of emotional needs:

> “A guy needs somebody . . . [Steinbeck’s ellipsis] to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody.”

> “They ain’t got nobody in the world that gives a hoot in hell about ’em!”

> “But not us. . . .”

> “But not us.”

> “Because. . . .”

> “Because I got you and. . . .”

> “And I got you. We got each other.”

A variation on the group-man theme of *In Dubious Battle* and *Grapes of Wrath*, the message is clearly stated by the play, but it comes in the form of dialogue between George and Lennie, and since George is always repeating mantras to Lennie, repetitions within the play seem in character, not sermons inserted by the author for the benefit of the audience. As Mimi Gladstein says: “*Of Mice and Men* is a tight, well-structured tale in which symbolism and philosophical content are sufficiently submerged in a straightforward story about itinerant laborers in the Salinas Valley” (Benson, *Short Novels*, 235). But the reality that grounded this novella and play in actual experience and actual locations, as well as known characters, disappears in the next two plays.

*The Moon Is Down* was written in Burgess Meredith’s farmhouse in Suffern in fall of 1941, then in the Bedford Hotel, New York City, under the influence of the Foreign Information Service, a propaganda arm of what became the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA. Originally set in an American town, but rejected by the Information Service as being destructive to morale to depict an occupied American city, Steinbeck reset the play in “an
anonymous coastal town in Europe.” As the first of Steinbeck’s contributions to the war effort, “The Moon Is Down” was written in Jay Parini’s opinion, “as an unabashed piece of propaganda” (263). The play was finished on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day; that is, it was completed before America entered the war, although rewriting the play during production added some more-current touches. The novella was published in March 1942; the play opened April 8, four months after America entered the war.

Thus its depiction of a foreign country is almost completely imaginary, as is its depiction of occupation. The enemy occupiers are never identified as Germans or Nazis, just as followers of the Leader, imposing his Order on the world. The occupied are never identified either, but, following Quisling’s manufactured defeat of Norway, the play’s references to a coastal community in touch with England, heavy winter snows, and a defeat through the careful planning of traitors, everyone assumed that Norway was intended. (Steinbeck had briefly visited Denmark and Sweden in 1937, but never Norway.) Steinbeck said, “I placed the story in an unnamed country. . . . The names of the people in the book I made as international as I could. I did not even call the Germans Germans but simply invaders” (Parini 261, citing Steinbeck’s “Reflections on a Lunar Eclipse”). Never a “Hell Hitler,” although Captain Toft clicks his heels in answer to orders. Stage directions read that the helmets “should be a variation on any obvious shape which will identify these as being soldiers of any known nation. Uniforms are as plain as possible” (4), and of course, in a standard play or movie convention, everyone speaks the same language without interpreters. These generalities miss a grounding in physical reality. What kind of trees are outside? What birds sing? Since the play is set on a coast, and the Andres are fishermen, what do they catch, cod or herring? Is the body of water a fjord or the ocean? The details that make us accept George and Lennie as real are missing. The characters in The Moon Is Down are developed as lifelike—Annie’s throwing water on the soldiers, Joseph’s fastidiousness, the marital by-play between the mayor and his wife, the fear and loneliness of the soldiers—but generally lifelike, not specifically so, exactly as Steinbeck intended. His success is also his failure.

Comforting Alex Morden, the Mayor says, “‘You will make the people one’—thus identifying the process of creation,” as John Ditsky says, “of the Steinbeckian ‘group-man’ . . .” (Benson, Short Novels, 103). Steinbeck wrote about humans’ need to be free, “the durability of democracy” (Parini 266), the townspeople’s organization into resistance fighters in the face of having their liberty taken from them, and their willingness to die for the cause, as the Mayor and Dr. Winter do. But Mayor Orden (the name is from the German root word for order) lectures the occupying colonel and concludes, as he is about to be executed, with Socrates’s peroration to the citizens of Athens who are about to execute him, thus further generalizing the resistance of individuals to tyranny. We do not weep for Mayor Orden because he’s an allegorical figure for human resistance, not a flesh and blood human being, not the pathetic child-man that Lennie is.

The Moon Is Down, a Book of the Month Club selection, sold 1,000,000 copies the first year (Parini 268), outselling Grapes of Wrath by far, and went through 76 editions in numbers of countries. Critics, James Thurber among them, attacked the novel for Steinbeck’s lack of patriotism in making the invaders (Nazis) as human. Overseas—in France, England, Italy, and Scandinavia, in particular—the play-novella was a tremendous success. But not so as a play in America—with only an eight weeks’ run—since America was not occupied. Moreover, in making his characters’ language non-specific, Steinbeck lost the tang of the slang from Of Mice and Men and his non-play novels. As Robert Ditsky says, “In The Moon Is Down, then, character emerges from a dialogue that is midway between the ostensibly naturalistic speech of Of Mice and Men and the exalted rhetoric of Burning Bright.” Charles Clancy quotes other critics who felt similarly: “Reloy Garcia feels that attempting to contribute to the war effort prompted Steinbeck to ‘narrow moralizing and thin propaganda; [becoming] a disseminator of parables, of thin moral tracts.’” And “[Warren] French conclude[d] that the didactic impulse of the fabulist (moralist) in the novella forced Steinbeck to ‘strain too hard to make his points’” (Hayashi 106). I agree with these critics: Steinbeck’s efforts towards the group-man theme he had introduced earlier in his novels dominates to such an extent that individual identity is lost.

As with The Moon Is Down, the play form of Burning Bright was written first, then revised in production and hence is different from novella. Joe Saul is not masked in the finished play script. Writing began January 9, 1950, and the first draft was finished January 31 (letters, p. 401; January 31, 1950); intensive thought, however, had begun earlier. He wrote wife-
to-be Elaine that “Everyman continues to grow in my mind” (Letters 380–381; October 11, 1949), continuing, “My Christ! It’s a dramatic thing”—although the play did not go to rehearsals until September 5, 1950 (Letters 402; late July 1950). His working title, “Everyman,” reveals his purpose to write a moral fable. *Burning Bright* is about a man sterile through rheumatic fever and his concern for progeny, with the ultimate recognition that all children belong to us. What may have sparked the play’s creation was his second wife’s, Gwyn’s, accusation that John Steinbeck the Fourth was not, in fact, the author’s son (Britch and Lewis 218). From that anguish grew Steinbeck’s thinking about paternity and relationships—groupman again. “He informed journalist Harvey Breit that he intended to ‘lift theatre above the realistic’” (219) and did so in a number of ways. The first act is set in a circus tent, an unspecific circus with calliope and circus music, in an unspecific city, except that it has an intersection of 12th and Main. With four characters: Joe Saul, his wife Mordeen, young aerialist Victor, and Friend Ed (probably named for the recently dead Ed Ricketts). It’s always Joe Saul, never just Joe or Mr. Saul, and it’s always Friend Ed, never just Ed. (One has to wonder whether the initials J.S. of Joe Saul also represent John Steinbeck.) The same four characters, Mordeen now pregnant by Victor, show up in Act 2, which takes place on a farm, again location unspecified, except that it snows in winter. A farm, a place for growing, is of course ideal for a fetus, and in the course of the second act, with Victor and Mordeen on stage, six months elapse in minutes of stage time while a storm rages outside the farmhouse set. The first scene of Act 3 takes place on a docked ship, the second in a hospital where Mordeen’s child is born on Christmas day. Steinbeck has universalized not just characters but even setting and theme.

The language, too, is stylized, with a minimum of contractions, the repetition of Ed’s title throughout, and kennings, like “laughter-starving time” (11), “love-ridden” (14), and stilted expressions such as “I’ve got a rustle in me. . . . You’re putting an itch in the air” (8–9)—although the play has fewer kennings than the novel. Steinbeck said that he wanted a “universal language,” a language that “did not intend to sound like ordinary speech, but rather by rhythm, sound, and image to give the clearest and best expression of what I wanted to say” in order “to lift the story to the parable expression of morality plays” (Benson 656). One critic was so annoyed as to respond: “Have I, I wonder, the admirer’s-right to tell Mr. Steinbeck that this trick has set me screaming silently in my reader-loss?” (L. A. G. Strong, *Spectator*, August 10, 1951, 198).

At the hospital, Joe Saul, knowing finally that Mordeen conceived the child as a gift to him, not out of desire for Victor, grandiloquently and portentously declares that the baby has taught him “Every man is father to all children and every child must have all men as father. . . . Mordeen, this is The Child I love, I love our child” (55, with caps on “the” and “child”). Each child is everyone’s. Though produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein, directed by Guthrie McClintic, designed by Jo Mielziner, and starring Barbara Bel Geddes, Kent Smith, and Howard Da Silva, the play closed after only thirteen performances. The audience simply did not have flesh and blood people to identify with—just ideas about overcoming one’s personal desire to extend one’s blood lines and recognizing one’s part of groupman. As Britch and Lewis say, “In the barn Rose of Sharon assumes the role of universal mother; at the hospital Joe Saul proclaims himself the universal father” (219). Mimi Gladstein says that Steinbeck’s best contemporaries “were wary of statements of theme, relying on readers to abstract meaning from the language and sequence of events. . . . He. . . . moved from the terse, concrete objectivity of Of Mice and Men and the honest inarticulateness of the Joads to the mouthy platitudes of *Burning Bright*. . . . Word replaces flesh, and the reader/audience is left with empty abstraction” (Benson, *Short Novels*, 236, 244).

What Steinbeck forgot, especially in the two later plays, is that any character extremely well-drawn from life, a George Small or Cal Trask, will have enough common experience in him for us to identify with, however unusual the character or the situation, although even the characters in the novels were often accused by critics of being straw figures, mouthpieces for what Steinbeck wanted to say. Audiences identify with real life in real situations. Steinbeck did not need to label his characters as Everyman or humanity for us to see that they were; what he needed to do was endow them with greater particularity, with flesh and blood and recognizable roots. Then they and their messages might have lived longer.

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Elizabeth McMurray (essay date fall 2004)


[In the following essay, McMurray suggests that the characters of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* are portrayed as actors in a play, performing parts rather than acting as themselves.]

In *Of Mice and Men,* Curley’s wife thinks she could have “went with shows” (78), but instead performs for all the men on the ranch. In her introduction, she is described as “heavily made up” (31). Much has been written about this enigmatic character who consistently performs any role other than herself. She does not even have a name. Instead, she exists by playing, alternately, wife, temptress, sex object, and dreamer. She “is incapable of conceiving any contact without some sexual context,” as Steinbeck wrote to Clare Luce when she played the part on Broadway in 1937, but “. . . if you knew her, if you could ever break down the thousand little defenses she has built up, you would find a nice person, an honest person, and you would end up by loving her. But such a thing can never happen” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 155). It can never happen because in order to survive, Curley’s wife consistently retreats to various roles, masks she dons in Steinbeck’s play within a play.

Not only Curley’s wife, but all the characters in *Of Mice and Men* play roles in what Steinbeck called his play-novelette. As he explains, “Simply stated, *Of Mice and Men* was an attempt to write a novel that could be played from the lines, or a play that could be read” (*America and Americans* 155). Rarely does anyone in *Of Mice and Men* present his or her true self. Along with Curley’s wife, the actions of Lennie, George, Curley, Crooks, Candy, and even the lighting itself consistently remind readers that this is, indeed, a play within a play. Steinbeck creates a world where people are prevented from being their true selves, and in the rare instances when they reveal a more authentic self, they face negative consequences.

In the opening scene, the reader sees Lennie not being himself but trying to imitate his companion. “Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see whether he had it just right. He pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George’s hat was” (4). Lennie’s imitation of George continues: “George lay back on the sand and crossed his hands under his head, and Lennie imitated him, raising his head to see whether he were doing it right” (7). As George and Lennie head for their new jobs, George essentially tells Lennie not to reveal himself. In the hope that Lennie’s true nature can be muted, George insists: “You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job. . . .” (6). Lennie is told repeatedly who and what to be; he tries his best to play the roles he is assigned.
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” (12). 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 nobody about it. . . . Jus’ go on like we was gonna buck barley the rest of our lives” (61). His true intentions, however, are embedded in conversations 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 play 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.

With less versatility in the roles he can play, Crooks is confined to the role of the “negro stable buck.” He tries to explain to Lennie, “They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me” (67). It takes Lennie, who is the least able to comprehend role playing, to coax Crooks into greater authenticity. As they talk, Lennie brings Crooks out of his role. Candy, the bunkhouse sweeper, looking for Lennie, also ends up in the room. It is clear Candy is embarrassed to be there. He scratches his wrist stump as he explains, “I been here a long time. . . . An’ Crooks been here a long time. This’s the first time I ever been in his room” (75). Candy is uncomfortable stepping out of his role, but he is, at least briefly, doing so. This movement toward truer selves is halted abruptly, however, when Curley’s wife appears. Faced with her constant and overt performance, Crooks returns immediately to his “appropriate” behavior: “Crooks had retired into the terrible protective dignity of the negro” (79). Like Lennie and George, Crooks and Candy assume roles to protect their vulnerability.

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” (44). Like an actor scanning to make eye contact in a play, Candy consults the outside forces, which help shape his response. In a discussion of The Moon Is Down, John Ditsky describes a similar “staginess” in another of Steinbeck’s play-novelettes: “. . . they are characters seen precisely as characters, aware that they are playing roles in a drama for which they have already begun to rehearse. Small wonder, then, that they act and speak as ‘stagily’ as they do” (103). Ditsky goes on to point out “. . . the mind-set of characters aware of putting on a performance, and others who as yet are simply ‘audience’” (103). 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” (Hadella 58). 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 performative nature of this work is emphasized by Steinbeck’s description of lighting. The lighting is indicative of a stage production: “Slim reached up over the card table and turned on the tin-shaded electric light. Instantly the table was brilliant with light, and the cone shade threw its brightness straight downward, leaving the corners of the bunk house still dusk” (38). When the action is set outdoors, as Hadella suggests, “. . . Steinbeck evokes the natural elements of sunlight, shade, and darkness to convey a sense of stage lighting and the opening and closing of scenes” (27). Steinbeck evokes the stage for his players.

Setting Of Mice and Men in Soledad is appropriate. Soledad, meaning “lonely place” in Spanish (Spilka 61), is indeed a place of solitude and loneliness for characters who do not share their true selves. Instead, they find protection in accepting roles and performing parts. Steinbeck has created a play within a play in his theater group known as Of Mice and Men.

WORKS CITED


Bert Cardullo (essay date winter 2007)


[In the following essay, Cardullo focuses on the thematic importance of the figure of Candy as well as Steinbeck’s nostalgic perception of the land and early-twentieth-century American farming in Of Mice and Men.]

It has often been suggested that the Candy-and-his-dog subplot in Of Mice and Men (1937) is too much, that it is a typical example of Steinbeck’s heavyhandedness or overfondness for parallels.1 In fact, some student and workshop productions of the play omit the dog entirely. But Candy and the dog are very important to the action. The point of Carlson’s shooting of the dog—who is old and blind and smells—is not to make an easy parallel with George’s shooting of Lennie, as Peter Lisca and Harry T. Moore seem to think.2 It is not so much the dog who is in the same position as the imbecile Lennie; it is the shooting of the dog that places Candy in the same position. Once he does not have his dog to look after anymore, Candy realizes the precariousness of his own position on the ranch: he is without one hand and therefore only able to “swamp out” bunkhouses, and he is fast approaching senility.

To stress the similarity between Candy’s position and Lennie’s, Steinbeck has Candy, and no other character in the play, treat Lennie as his mental equal. Furthermore, George never explains Lennie’s condition to Candy as he does, say, to Slim. Not accidentally, it is to Lennie that Candy describes the “figuring” he has been doing, describing how, if they go about it right, they can make some money on the rabbits they propose to have on their farm (even if Lennie, for his part, can think of nothing except petting the rabbits). Candy sounds like Lennie when he says, “We gonna have a room to ourselves. We gonna have a dog and chickens. We gonna have green corn and maybe a cow.” Furthermore, he acts like Lennie when he comes into Crooks’s room in the barn, saying only, “This is the first time I ever been in [Crooks’s] room”; he seems honestly not to realize that the reason for this is that, as Crooks declares, “Guys don’t come in a colored man’s room” (128). Yet Candy has been on the ranch for a long time, just as Crooks has.

Like Lennie, Candy needs someone to run his affairs, to make the rest of his life easier and more congenial. He needs George. Slim promises Candy a puppy from his bitch Lulu’s litter to compensate for the shooting of his sheep dog, but Candy never gets that puppy, and he never asks for it. Lennie can attempt to look after a pup, because he has George to look after him. Candy is in search of a home for himself; he cannot afford, at this point, to give one to a dog. But Candy, finally, is not Lennie, and George will not team up with him after Lennie is gone. Candy does not accompany the men in their hunt for Lennie after Curley’s wife is found dead in the barn. He stays all alone on the ranch, deserted by everyone, as it were, even as he will be by George after Lennie has been shot. Candy’s “Poor bastard” (161), spoken to Curley’s dead wife (lying in the hay) once the men have left, could just as well be applied to himself as to Lennie or Curley’s wife.

There is tragedy in Of Mice and Men, then, despite Stanley Kauffmann’s (among others) suggestion to the contrary.3 That is why Candy is in the play. The tragedy is so understated, however, that one barely notices it. This tragedy really has nothing to do with George’s shooting of Lennie, per se. As the film critic Otis Ferguson once remarked, “I have never been quite sure that George shouldn’t have shot [Lennie] before the story began” (Ferguson 285). Ferguson was not trying to be funny. His meaning was that Lennie is a “case” on the loose, and that his killing of Curley’s wife, and being shot for it by George, could just as easily have happened before or after the play as during it. Steinbeck arranges for it to happen during the play, after the two men meet Candy. Does he do this just to inspire sympathy for poor Lennie, as many believe?4 His point was that George deeply loved this “idiot” with the result that he always wanted Lennie to be with him in his travels and in his work. Once he shoots Lennie, George can still get the farm with Candy if he wants to. (Recall that
it is largely Candy’s money that will buy the farm, and Candy is still more than willing to put up that money.) George declines, which proves that being in one safe place with Lennie was more important to him than simply being in one safe place. He elects to continue living the hard life of a ranch hand rather than settle down to life on a small farm with Candy. George can have a better life, yet he turns it down. Unquestionably, he will suffer more on the road, without Lennie, than on the farm, without Lennie. He never gives himself a chance to, in his words, “get used to” Candy.

This is not simple pathos. It approximates tragedy because it suggests not simply that George loved Lennie too much—that he was unnaturally attached to him—but also that only by developing an unnatural attachment to Lennie could he ever have put up with (and done so much for) someone like him in the first place. The implication of George’s rejection of Candy’s offer is that he is sentencing himself to the same fate as other “guys that go round on the ranches alone” (77); he will not have anyone, and after a while he will get mean. He will live out the fate predicted for him by Crooks, an accompaniment to, or extension of, the tragic inevitability of the play. As Crooks explains:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road and on the ranches, bindles on their back and that same damn thing in their head. Hundreds of ’em. They come and they quit and they go on. And every damn one of ’em is got a little piece of land in his head. And never a goddamn one of ’em gets it.

(126)

The implication is that George will have that little piece of land in his head once again, after months of working hard and blowing his money in “cathouses” and pool rooms Only then will he become tragically aware of how he really lost his land—not by losing Lennie, but by rejecting Candy—and how he will never be given the chance to get it again. Like Othello, he will have loved not wisely but too well. Like any other tragic hero’s, his awareness will be one of self-acceptance more than self-reproach.

So while the play underlines the bond of friendship—and loneliness—that exists between George and Lennie (a bond difficult for some in today’s audiences to accept on any but homosexual grounds), it also makes that bond responsible for George’s rash decision not to buy the small farm with Candy’s financial assistance. We are in full sympathy with George when he makes this decision; still, we cannot help but feel at the same time that he is making a mistake, that he is doing something noble yet horrible and wasteful (of Candy’s life as well as his own). Candy’s “Poor bastard” this time applies to George, whom we leave alone, with the dead Lennie, at the end of the play.

George, it must be said, is not especially articulate or self-examining. He has never married; Lennie is instead his emotional attachment. He does not make many friends or ask many questions. Candy is his only “attachment” to the ranch. Candy first fills him in about the Boss, then about Curley and his wife, Crooks, and Slim. Candy, with his life savings, becomes George’s way out of the ranch life. With Lennie dead, he potentially becomes George’s emotional attachment. He is, in the end, the embodiment or articulation of all the aims and emotions that George in his sorrow is oblivious to, but which will live to haunt him again. That is why Steinbeck ends scenes one and two of Act III with Candy and George in the same position: hunching over dead bodies. They are in the same position, in need of each other but inalterably separated. Finally they are silent, one seemingly in memory of the other.

Like George, the play’s tragedy is quiet. Like George, the play seems to focus more on Lennie that its own life. That similarity, more than anything else, shows the play’s identification with George. The play sacrifices attention to him for attention to Lennie. That is the way George would have wanted it, and that is why, unfairly, Of Mice and Men has too often been called nothing more than a work of sentiment.4 Sentimentality is usually accounted a vice, because it bespeaks a propensity to express a greater degree of feeling than a specific situation warrants. But sentimentality need not be a vital flaw; it isn’t in Of Mice and Men, where Steinbeck controls it.

Much more than a work of sentiment, Of Mice and Men comes to George’s tragedy the long way around, through Candy. Lennie is not diminished by this; rather, George and Candy are elevated. One of the ways in which George in particular is elevated is through Steinbeck’s thorough weaving of the seemingly throwaway, sentimental symbol of the mouse into the fabric of the play’s action. We see that symbol first in the play’s title, which Steinbeck took from the well-known Robert Burns poem “To a Mouse” containing the line “The best-laid schemes o’ mice and men, / Gang aft agley [go oft astray].” It is clear why the dramatist so borrowed the phrase “of mice and men,” for George and Lennie’s plan to get a
small place of their own goes astray once Lennie kills Curley’s wife. But there is another, less immediately apparent reason, for Steinbeck uses the dead mouse to symbolize the past and to foreshadow the future.

To wit, Lennie always killed the mice that his Aunt Clara gave him to play with by pinching their heads; he could have killed the girl in the town of Weed when he tried to feel her dress (as if she were a mouse) and she strongly resisted. He and George were chased out of Weed because of this incident, and, at the start of the play, they are on their way to a ranch job in the Salinas Valley when they stop for the night in a small clearing. George throws into the brush the dead mouse that Lennie has been secretly petting during their journey, but Lennie retrieves it when he goes for firewood. George then takes it from him again and tosses it as far away as he can.

George’s action is symbolic, for he is removing from his sight an omen of the future. After they go to work, Lennie kills first the puppy Slim gives him by handling it too often and too roughly; then he kills Curley’s wife by accidentally breaking her neck when she tries to stop him from stroking her hair so hard. He flees the ranch and returns to the small clearing to wait for George, who has told him to go there if he gets into trouble. Lennie returns, that is, to the place where his past and his future converged in the symbol of the mouse, and where he, as a kind of per to George, will await at George’s hands the fate of the mice, the puppy, and Curley’s wife: death.

The play is thus the story of two men and the symbolic mice that surround them and contribute to their doom—a doom that originates, in the first place, in the very nature of their relationship: Lennie’s dim-witted “mouse” to George’s thoughtful man. Even as Lennie “loved” the mice, the puppy, and Curley’s Wife so much that he inadvertently killed them, so too, as I have argued, George loved Lennie so much that he wound up having to kill him. He wanted to remain with Lennie and lead a normal life eventually on a small farm, whereas the best place for his friend would have been in a home or hospital or even in the wild. Just when they are able to get the farm with the help of Candy’s money, the inevitable happens and Lennie kills Curley’s wife. George then shoots Lennie as one would an animal, as he wants him neither to suffer a savage death at Curley’s hands, nor, if he escaped death, to waste away in jail. It is no accident that in the opening scene of Of Mice and Men, Lennie is likened to an animal; George angrily proclaims that he should be in a cage with lots of mice where they can pet him, and Lennie retaliates by saying that perhaps he would be better off alone, living in the hills or in a cave.

Although Steinbeck first wrote Of Mice and Men in the form of a novel, of course, I think that the story of Lennie and George, and Candy, is better suited to the drama into which he eventually turned it. George, as I have suggested, is a more or less mute protagonist, and in the story as novel we expect Steinbeck, as the narrator, to speak for him and to explain his reasoning and his feelings. But Steinbeck does not. This fact, more specifically, is why the novel, together with its extension as a play, has often struck readers overwhelmingly as a work of sentiment. By documenting the story of George and Lennie without fully accounting for George’s role in events and the full effect of events on him, the novel seems if not thereby to glorify George’s suffering, then to martyr Lennie.

The play doesn’t have this problem, or shouldn’t to the attentive reader or spectator. It has no narrator, obviously, so we don’t expect anyone to speak for George. We therefore accept his muteness more easily, and we look for the materials of the drama itself to speak for him. Because of the necessary condensation of the dramatic form, we see more distinctly the choice he has, after Lennie’s death, between life alone on the road and life on a farm with Candy. We see all the more powerfully, because they are embodied on stage, the love and compassion George has for Lennie. Hence the drama is ideally suited to the portrayal of George Milton’s tragedy, because, even as his actions speak for themselves, so too does the drama’s action—or imitation of an action—speak for itself. This drama, like most drama, has no narrator, and George is unable or unwilling to “narrate” his deepest feelings and sorrows. Quietly, through the strategic placement of Candy in the action, Of Mice and Men dramatizes George’s tragedy. Quietly, through his automatic rejection of life on the farm with Candy, George conveys to us, perhaps better than the words of a more articulate man ever could, the depth of his love for Lennie and the extent to which he is willing to—and can do nothing but—suffer for that love.

In the end, Steinbeck touched some deep American themes in Of Mice and Men: the great myth of the road and two male companions, of our hunger for “brotherhood”—a feeling enhanced by the seeming loneliness of all Americans during the Great Depression. For this reason, perhaps, the thirties were years when the theater, along with the other arts, re-
discovered America. *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), one of several of Lynn Riggs’s Oklahoma plays, Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1933), and Paul Osborn’s *Morning’s at Seven* (1939) are among the works that in one way or another perform a function similar to that of Steinbeck’s play. *Of Mice and Men*, unlike the many (New York) city plays from the 1930s, for its part naturalistically concentrates on the unemployed of the farm lands—the itinerants and ranch workers—while it also alludes to the bus and truck drivers whose travels through the country permitted them to observe the state of the nation in its broad horizon.

A strong residue of nineteenth-century feeling about the land persists in *Of Mice and Men*—that working on the land is the basic good while owning some of it is salvation. There exists no other successful American drama since the mid-to-late thirties with that feeling (except peripherally, as in the case of the itinerant actor James Tyrone’s obsession with landlordship in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1941)), or even one centered on rural work. Steinbeck knows our erstwhile longing for a home on the range, not a mere feeding place. He has the same genuine sympathy for the lonesome devil whose sole companion is a mangy old dog as for the black American cut off from his fellow workers because of his skin color. Indeed, Steinbeck uses something like an austere sorrow, as opposed to the radical politics of John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, or his own novels *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), to suggest that none of America’s “underprivileged” will ever reach the home they crave until they arrive at a greater social consciousness. Because of what has happened since it was written—the rapid decline of family farming, the relentless burgeoning of mechanized agribusiness—*Of Mice and Men* has come to be a play about the end not only of George and Lennie, but also of something in America, in American drama, and in the American dream.

Notes

1. See Robert Murray Davis’s introduction to *Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays* for a discussion of this common criticism of Steinbeck’s work; he writes, “When structural patterns in Steinbeck’s novels are clear, they are almost blindingly obvious” (p.4).

2. In an otherwise highly laudatory reading of the “play-novelette,” as he calls it, as a Biblical allegory (George=Cain and Lennie=Abel), Peter Lisca writes:

   Less subtle, perhaps too obvious, is the relationship of Candy and his dog, which is made parallel to that of George and Lennie . . . . Thus the mounting threats to the dog and his eventual shooting foreshadow the destruction of George’s “dog.” Lennie, which eventually takes place, shot by the same gun in the same way—“right in the back of the head . . . why he’d never know what hit him.”

   (qtd. from Peter Lisca, *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* pp. 84-85.)

Harry T. Moore goes so far as to say that “one of the most noticeable of the many little tricks [that] have been used throughout the story to prepare us for Lennie’s death is the obvious comparison of Lennie with a worthless old dog that must be shot, as Lennie must be at the last” (qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study* 52).


4. In a review of the 1975 New York production of *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Edwin Sherlin, Stanley Kauffmann of *The New Republic* wrote:

   The tragic inevitability at which Steinbeck aimed is dimmed by the creakiness of the arrangements. We know with somewhat pleasant ironic foreknowledge in the first scene, when the two friends discuss their plans to have a place of their own, that they will never get it; but Steinbeck ensures the grim ending with the nervous young husband at the ranch and his arbitrarily restless wife. Besides, Lennie’s feeble-mindedness mitigates the tragedy. He is a “case” on the loose, not a man susceptible to trouble. If he were only slow-witted, instead of defective, there would be some hint of what his life might have been. With the idiot Lennie there are no alternatives.

   (qtd. from Stanley Kauffmann, *Persons of the Drama* 158.)

Harry T. Moore is more illuminating on the subject of *Of Mice and Men* as tragedy, but his view of George as no more than a pathetic character is the opposite of mine:

   Violence without tragedy: that is the weakness of this book . . . . There is no tragedy as we understand the word in reference to literature. . . . There is no authentic tragedy, which comes out of character. Even if we slur over the criticism that Lennie is a poor choice for a central figure in the story because from the start the odds against him are too great—even if we get beyond this and admit George as the true protagonist, we still don’t find tragedy. George is no more than pathetic. He attracts sympathy because he has to lose his friend Lennie, to whom he has been so loyal, and whom he has to kill at the last in order to save him from the others. But because this isn’t genuine tragedy, it gives the reader a brutal shock when George kills Lennie, and it cannot be anything else . . . .

   (qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study* 50-52.)
Howard Levant, for his part, criticizes *Of Mice and Men* for what he believes to be its split focus:

The secondary hero is subordinate in Steinbeck’s fiction—except in *Of Mice and Men*. There, Lennie’s murder propels George into a sudden prominence that has no structural basis. Is the novel concerned with Lennie’s innocence or George’s guilt? The formal requirements of a play-novelette mandate a structural re-focus. Steinbeck needs a high point to ring down the curtain. With Lennie dead, Steinbeck must use and emphasize George’s guilt. The close is formulated—the result of a hasty switch—not structured from preceding events, so it produces an inconclusive ending in view of what has happened previously. And the ideal of the farm vanishes with Lennie’s death, when George tells Candy the plan is off.

(qtd. from Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study* 143.)


7. In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin claims that *Of Mice and Men* is “openly written for the stage” (p. 399), and Harry T. Moore elaborates:

Structurally, the novel was from the first a play: it is divided into six parts, each part a scene—the reader may observe that the action never moves away from a central point in each of these units. Steinbeck’s manner of writing was coming over quite firmly to the dramatic . . . After *Of Mice and Men* was published and the suggestion was made that it be prepared for the stage, Steinbeck said it could be produced directly from the book, as the earliest moving pictures had been produced. It was staged in almost exactly this way in the spring of 1937 by a labor-theater group in San Francisco . . . When Steinbeck transferred the story into its final dramatic form for the New York stage he took 85% of his lines bodily from the novel. A few incidents needed juggling, one or two minor new ones were introduced, and some (such as Lennie’s imaginary speech with his Aunt Clara at the end of the novel) were omitted. A Hollywood studio bought the film rights to *Of Mice and Men*, but the picture has not been made yet.

(qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, 48–49). Moore was writing in 1939, the Lewis Milestone-directed film of *Of Mice and Men* was released in 1940, to be followed over half a century later by Gary Sinise’s film of the play, with a screenplay by the dramatist Horton Foote.)

8. For the opposite view—that, because Steinbeck structured the novel of *Of Mice and Men* as a play, he restricted his narrative to visible action and thus was unable fully to explore complex human motives and relationships—see Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, p. 134-135.

**Works Cited**


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**FURTHER READING**

**Criticism**


Argues that Munro’s short story ‘Open Secrets’ relies upon allusions to Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.


Examines style, form, and themes in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.


Suggests that *Of Mice and Men* marked the end of the first phase of Steinbeck’s literary career.

Calls Of Mice and Men a “Naturalistic fable.”


Argues that Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men can be viewed as the last book in a pseudo-trilogy of works (in combination with Tortilla Flat and In Dubious Battle) about the “ironic” nature of fate.


Suggests that Of Mice and Men is a “mythic-allegorical” parable that relies upon religious thought for its genesis.


Describes Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men as a novel in which class differences force the lower castes of society to dream rather than act on their hopes.


Likens George’s care of Lennie in Of Mice and Men to a doctor’s ministering to patients.

Additional coverage of Steinbeck’s life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale: American Writers; Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Vol. 12; Beacham’s Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography & Resources, Vol. 3; Beacham’s Guide to Literature for Young Adults, Vols. 2, 3, 13; Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography, Vol. 1929-1941; Contemporary Authors, Vols. 1-4R; Contemporary Authors—Obituary, Vols. 25-28R; Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vols. 1, 35; Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vols. 1, 5, 9, 13, 21, 34, 45, 57, 124; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vols. 7, 9, 212, 275, 309, 332; Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, Vol. 2; DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors 3.0; DISCovering Authors: British Edition; DISCovering Authors: Canadian Edition; DISCovering Authors Modules, Eds. Drama, Most-Studied, Novelists; Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century, Ed. 3; Exploring Short Stories; Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of American Literature; Literature and Its Times, Vol. 3; Literature Resource Center; Major 20th-Century Writers, Eds. 1, 2; Major 21st-Century Writers (eBook), Ed. 2005; Modern American Literature, Ed. 5; Novels for Students, Vols. 1, 5, 7, 17, 19, 28, 34, 37; Reference Guide to American Literature, Ed. 4; Reference Guide to Short Fiction, Ed. 2; St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers; Short Stories for Students, Vols. 3, 6, 22; Short Story Criticism, Vols. 11, 37, 77, 135; Something about the Author, Vol. 9; Twayne’s United States Authors; Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 135; 20th Century Romance and Historical Writers; Twentieth-Century Western Writers, Eds. 1, 2; World Literature Criticism, Ed. 5; and Writers for Young Adults.