

## UNVEILING MULTIPLE THEMES AND CONCERNS: A READING OF JOHN STEINBECK'S *OF MICE AND MEN*

*Rafraf Shakil*

*Assistant Professor, Sharda University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India*

---

**Received: 23 Aug 2018**

**Accepted: 31 Aug 2018**

**Published: 08 Sep 2018**

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*John Steinbeck's novel of Mice and Men embodies multiple levels of themes in spite of its brevity. It presents many major issues of the then prevailing conditions of America during the Great Depression and contains several worthy themes related to social and political upheaval. It continues the recurring themes in Steinbeck's fiction written in the 1930s and 1940s like Tortilla Flat, the Pearl, Cannery Row and Grapes of Wrath. Like the other works were written during the Great Depression the novel touches on several themes: the American dream, the loneliness and isolation, the powerlessness and economic injustice, friendship and human nature. The novel gives voice to the working class of California during the 1930s. Of Mice and Men is a story chronicling a few days in the lonely lives of two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, a story about their dreams and aspirations and the circumstances and forces that work against them. The relationship and the affectionate bond shared by George and Lennie open many types of interpretations for critics. It is a kind of protest against the life condition of migrant workers. The effective ending of the novel is particularly climactic and shocking however it additionally gives a lesson in comprehension of the awfulness and the tragedy of life. The present paper aims to highlight multiple themes and concerns represented by the Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck in his little masterpiece, 'Of Mice and Men'.*

*"In every bit of honest writing in the world, there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other".*

*John Steinbeck in his 1938 journal entry*

**KEYWORDS:** *American Dream, Companionship, Great Depression, Isolation, Migrant Workers*

### **INTRODUCTION**

John Steinbeck was an American novelist, story writer, essayist, and war correspondent. He was born in 1902 in California, USA. John Steinbeck is the Author of Twenty seven books, including sixteen novels, six nonfiction books and five collections of short stories. He was honored with many prestigious Awards for his literary works including Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1940 and Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold*, published in 1929.

He achieved his first critical success with *Tortilla Flat* in 1935 followed by three novels about the migrant working class beginning with *In Dubious Battle* in 1936, *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, and his magnum opus, *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. Steinbeck became the most famous and critically acclaimed writer of his time with the publication of his series of 'California novels and Dust Bowl fiction set among the common people during the Great Depression.

The novel got extremely positive contemporary reviews and was considered as the new novel well up to par with [Steinbeck's] previous novels selling 117,000 copies. It was chosen as *The Book of the Month Club* even before its publication. It was praised by many notable critics including Maxine Garrard Christopher Morley, and Harry Thornton Moore. *New York Times* critic Ralph Thompson described the novella as a "grand little book, for all its ultimate melodrama." Originally the title of the book was 'Something That Happened' but it was changed into 'OF Mice and Men' after Steinbeck read a poem by Robert Burns, "To A Mouse". The poem is a lamentation of a farmer who accidentally destroys a mouse's nest while plowing his fields. According to critic Michael Meyer, writing for the modern *Literary Encyclopedia*, Steinbeck "especially liked the parallels suggested by the poem's story-line which depicts the random destruction of a mouse's home by a plow." Meyer further asserts that Steinbeck felt that there were striking similarities between "the fate of the mouse and humanity [...] that human efforts and dreams for the unattainable are ultimately as futile as a rodent trying to protect his home from the more powerful blade of a plow." *Of Mice and Men* is also a story of the failed dreams and loneliness. The central theme of the novel as represented by the author is near impossibility of attaining the American dream in the face of huge and random challenges, like natural and economic disasters. It is one of the most important and influential novels by Steinbeck which shows the devastating impact of the Great Depression. It comments on the elusiveness of the American dream. The novel touches on several themes: the American dream, the loneliness and isolation, the powerlessness and economic depression, friendship and human nature, the plight of the laborers, the perils of isolation, and the hope for a better future. The novel gives voice to the working class of California during the 1930s. It also addresses a variety of issues, including racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, that plays out against the backdrop of lonely people seeking happiness. The paper aims to analyze several worthy themes of the novel.

It is the story of two migrant workers George and Lennie, who belong to nowhere and to no one but to themselves. George is small, quick, and sharp having strong features. Lennie is his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes having a mild mental disability. They go to the ranch to ranch for work but can't settle anywhere because of Lennie's mental disability. Lennie always gets into some sort of trouble, forcing them to flee. Lennie totally depends upon George for guidance and protection. Both George and Lennie share a dream of a farm of their own. A dream that Lennie believes in wholeheartedly.

"But not us," Lennie interrupted. "We got a future. Some day gonna have a little house and a couple of Acres an' a cow an' some pigs, an' live off the fatta the land'- an' have rabbits! An' I get to tend the Rabbits" (OMM).

Steinbeck's works are generally a reflection of the Great Depression, the time when people were treated unfairly for their social class, gender, and race. In the 1930's during the Great Depression, the American dream became the nightmare for many people. *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* are the most important novels by Steinbeck that represents the reality of this most difficult period. It was the main theme dealt by many American writers of the time. In *Of*

*Mice and Men* it is mainly represented by the central characters, George and Lennie to own a piece of land.

*"O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of Acres an' a cow and some pigs and—"*

*"An' live off the fatta the land'," Lennie shouted. "An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we're Going to have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the Stove and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that George."*

*"Why'n't you do it yourself? You know all of it."*

*"No...you tell it. It ain't the same if I tell it. Go on...George. How I get to tend the rabbits."(OMM)*

In the novel nearly every character has a dream such as George and Lennie's

dream of owning their own farm, Candy wants to join them on their farm and Curley's wife dreams of becoming a movie star. Dreams help them to deal with their loneliness and isolation in some ways. Dreams give them a kinda hope to struggle and fight with hardships of life. However, they know that they strive towards a life that is unattainable for them for various reasons. The great depression was an age when dreams were no longer possible. In the novel Steinbeck writes about how all the characters fail to fulfill their dreams however, they all believe in the myth of the American dream that takes different shapes in their minds.

In 1937, Steinbeck told a *New York Times* reporter that Lennie was a real character with whom he worked for few weeks but he killed a foreman, not a girl. The message of the story which Steinbeck wants to showcase becomes more powerful as the central character is a believable contemporary figure. George and Lennie wish to work for anyone but to themselves only. They can't control their lives as they have to work for their owners. As reflected in the novel one of the most important issues of the ranch workers is loneliness and solitude.

*"Guys like us, that work on ranches," George told Lennie, "are the loneliest guys in the world. They got No family. They don't belong to a place. They make a little stake and then they go into town and blow it in, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch". (OMM).*

In the novel loneliness is a significant factor in several characters' lives. Candy is lonely because his dog is gone, Curley's wife is desperately lonely for two reasons, first her husband is not a friend she hoped for and second, she has broken dreams for better life and to become a movie star. She flirts with the men on the ranch to deal with her loneliness which makes Curley more abusive and jealous.

*"Oh!" She puts her hands behind her back and leaned against the doors that her body was thrown Forward. "You're the new fellas that just come, ain'tya?" (OMM).*

Crooks further illustrates the theme candidly as,

*"A guy goes nuts if he ain't got anybody. Don't make any difference who the guy is, long's he's with You."(OMM).*

Crooks tell how he has sat night after night reading and thinking and has never had anyone to talk to.

*“He got nothing to measure by. I saw things out there. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I just' don't know.”*

*(OMM).*

This shows in many ways what loneliness is, and what it is for him. His loneliness and solitude have detached him from the world. Crooks is black, he does not have any friend on the ranch so he makes a place of his own. In the same section Crooks says,

*“Maybe you see now. You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have anybody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunkhouse and play rummy 'cause you were black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody – to be near him. He whined. A guy goes Nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make any difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell you, he Cried, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick.”(OMM)*

The friendship between George and Lennie is the result of loneliness. However, they are fortunate and happy to have each other. They are lucky as they live together, travel together and take care of each other. George always protects Lennie and frequently confirms the relation between them.

*"He's my... cousin," George tells the ranch boss. "I told his old lady I'd take care of him" (OMM).*

The boss and the other characters are suspicious of the bond shared by George and Lennie, they always question their friendship and keep gossiping at their back for they have never seen anything like it on the ranch. Loneliness and isolation is the norm of the world they live in. Even Slim, who is usually sympathetic and understanding, expresses surprise.

*"Ain't many guys travel around together? I don't know why. Maybe ever 'body in the whole Damned world is scared of each other.”(OMM).*

Staying together is unusual for the migrant workers. People live in alienation as they don't trust one another. The theme of isolation and loneliness is furthermore explored by Crooks and Curley's wife as they crave for companionship.

*A guy sets alone out here at night, maybe read in' books or think in' or stuff like that. Sometimes he gets thinkin', an' he got nothing to tell him what so is an' what ain't so. Maybe if he sees somethin', he doesn't know whether it's right or not. He can't turn to some other guy and ask him if he sees it too. He can't tell. He got nothing to measure by. I saw things out here. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some Guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I just' don't*

*Know. (OMM).*

Curley's wife dies as a result of her craving for human companionship, "someone to talk to."

Crooks also show his desire to have a companion like George and Lennie and to expand fellowship. But the dream of fellowship on the farm begins to lose its promise, at the moment that George and Candy discover the body of Curley's wife, they both realize that the dream is lost; their partnership dissolves. Actually, the dream was doomed from the start, because fraternal relations cannot survive in a world ruled by poverty, loneliness, and homelessness. The theme of loneliness is symbolized at the beginning of the novel as the author establishes the setting as "a few miles south of Soledad." Soledad is the name of a town in central California, but it is also the Spanish word for solitude. Yet Steinbeck's emphasis is on the greatness of his characters' attempt to live as brothers.

The most important ingredient essential to the attainment of George's and Lennie's dream is friendship. Their friendship is special as shown in the novel. There are other friendships in the novel: Slim and Carlson, Candy and Crooks, but these are ordinary friendships. The bond between George and Lennie, which goes back many years, is different. Lennie, mentally disabled but physically very strong, cannot survive on his own. He always needs George to protect and guide him. Lennie often gets into a trouble because of his mental disability. He loves to pet soft things but he hurts them unknowingly. His love for soft things always goes against him as he does not know his own strength. George sometimes complains about having to take care of Lennie. His tolerance gives him a sense of superiority but at the same time, George feels an honest and genuine affection for Lennie that he cannot openly admit.

*"Well, we ain't got any," George exploded. "Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a 'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. 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 cathouse all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An' I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool." Lennie knelt and looked over the fire at the angry George. And Lennie's face was drawn in with terror. "An' whatta I got," George went on furiously. "I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time." (OMM).*

Most importantly, without this friendship, neither George nor Lennie alone can think of attaining their dream and see it become a reality. The friendship lends hope to the dream, but the reality of their brutal life destroys the dream and the friendship. Although George is a survivor at the end, he is doomed to be alone. Steinbeck used a quote that appears several times in the novel to show seclusion and loneliness,

*'With us, it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us.'*(OMM).

*" But not us! An' why'? because ..... because I got you to look after me, and you me to look after you..."*(OMM).

Steinbeck emphasized the fact that despite the need for fellowship, how loneliness is sustained through the barriers established from acting inhuman to one another. Cruley's jealousy which causes all the ranch workers to avoid Cruley's wife makes her more lonely. Crooks barrier results from being barred from the bunkhouse by restraining him to the stable; his bitterness is partially broken, however, through Lennie's ignorance.

All the characters in the novel are powerless for various reasons such as intellectual, economic, or social conditions. Lennie has the greatest physical strength but his mental disability results in his powerlessness. The migrant workers are a victim of the Great Depression which makes them economically powerless. George, Candy, and Crooks want to purchase a homestead however due to the depression they are unable to generate enough money. The theme of powerlessness is more illustrated by Curley and his wife. Curley uses his aggressive nature and superior position in an attempt to take control of his wife and his father's farm. He constantly scolds the farm workers and accuses some of fooling around with his wife. Curley's wife is powerless because of the social conditions. She wants to be a movie star but she is unable to attain her dream.

*"I tell you I ain't used to livin' like this. I coulda made somethin' of myself." She said darkly, "Maybe I will yet." And then her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away. "I lived right in Salinas," she said. "Come there when I was a kid. Well, a show come through, an' I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my old' lady wouldn't let me. She says because I was only fifteen. But the guy says I coulda. If I'd go , I wouldn't be livin' like this, you bet." (OMM).*

Steinbeck also emphasizes on the evils of human nature through his characters. Curley threatens farm workers because of his jealousy and his aggressive nature. Curley's wife, on the other hand, is verbally manipulative. She uses her physical beauty and her sex appeal to gain attention. She flirts with the men on the ranch. So this is evident that both Curley and his wife represent the evils of human nature as both of them oppress and abuse the migrant workers in their different ways. The most important example of the evils of human nature is evident when Crooks criticizes Lennie's dream of owning a farm of his own. The characters are helpless and powerless by their isolation still they seek to destroy who are even weaker than they. Crooks admit that he longs for a companionship but he criticizes Lennie's weaknesses. Through such characters, Steinbeck represents a profound human truth that the oppression does not come only from the hands of the strong or the powerful. Crooks seems at his strongest when he has nearly reduced Lennie to tears for fear that something bad has happened to George, just as Curley's wife feels most powerful when she threatens to have Crooks lynched.

*"Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny."*

*Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego—nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless. (OMM).*

Through the novel, Steinbeck tries to show that the most visible kind of strength, that used to oppress others, is itself born of weakness. Lennie's puppy is another symbol of man's victory over the weak. The evil of human nature is furthermore illustrated by Candy's dog, once a fine sheepdog, when it is killed because it is no more useful for them. Candy fears that he himself is nearing an age when he will no longer be useful at the ranch, and therefore no longer welcome.

John Steinbeck's work is also critically acclaimed as the representation of social realism, a type of literature that takes into account the direct engagement with the problematic social conditions of a society. The beginning of the Twentieth century can be considered as a landmark in the social, political and literary history of America. Van Wyck Brooks says

*"Every writer I came to know called himself a radical, committed to some program for changing and improving the world."*

Steinbeck's characters deal with the economic hardships and such problems that are beyond their control. The concept of social realism and naturalism is used by the author in the novel when he evokes the idea that the protagonists are destined to fail from the very beginning. The two characters are presented with many difficulties and setbacks that are out of their control. These setbacks and misfortunes prevent them from attaining their dreams for a better life. Through the portrayal of the central characters of the novel Steinbeck tries to draw the attention to the everyday conditions of the working class and the poor who faced the economic depression of the time. In the age of economic depression, only the strong survived. This bitter reality is presented by characters in the scene when Carlson kills the dog with a gunshot. It foreshadows the death of Lennie because both of them are powerless and innocent. The killing of the dog and Lennie symbolize that the weak always fails to survive and the strong wins. The same theme is explored by Slim's puppies. Slim decides to drown them in the river because he is unable to take care of them and he knows that nobody has money to buy them. Once again it shows the harsh reality of survival.

The portrayal of Crooks can be seen as representing the social criticism of racism. He is a black man living in the world of white who oppress him both physically and mentally. Steinbeck used him to show the effects of discrimination. He is not allowed in the bunkhouse with white men. Racial discrimination is the part of the social setup as described in the story. It reaches its height in the novel when Curley's wife puts Crooks "in his place" by telling him that a word from her will have him lynched. Interestingly, only the flawed man Lennie does not see the color of Crooks' skin.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper analyzed multiple themes and concerns presented in the novel. The novel is not only a story of a particular time of Great Depression, rather it is timeless because it is a part of human existence; the pain of loneliness and solitude, the need of companionship, the importance of friendship, and the most important is the likelihood of holding around one's dream. A dream is a part of human nature, it makes people going on. The novel presents a critique on the myth of the American dream and the near impossibility of attaining it. The hardships of protagonists' proof that everyone

cannot gain it, social conditions prevent people from achieving the dream in American society. The novel, *of Mice and Men*, pictures the reality of Americans in the twentieth century. It depicts the social and political conditions of America and how the migrant workers suffered the hardships of the Great Depression. Steinbeck has unveiled and exposed many social evils such as corruption, economic injustice, racial discrimination, violence, and dehumanization. Steinbeck's little masterpiece has portrayed the social injustice which is still relevant in today's society and it makes it a modern classic. It is evident that he has presented the real picture of migrants and the marginalized. The problems of migrant workers presented in the novel are not limited to a particular place and a particular time of economic depression but these are real problems of today's migrant workers of the whole world. Migrant workers are facing the problems of discrimination on the basis of religion, caste and race, social injustice, poverty, violence, suppression and being treated as the second citizen from the centuries until today. We have come a long way since Great depression but we still have to go a long way to conquer the evils of the society we live in.

### REFERENCES

1. Steinbeck, John. (1993). *of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin,.
2. Ahnebrink, L.(1961). *The Beginning of Naturalism in American Fiction*. New York: Russell & Russell.
3. Meyer J. Michael, ed.(2009). *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland • Toronto • Plymouth, UK.
4. Andryšková, Jana. (2016). *The Great Depression in John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men*, bachelor's thesis, Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Czech Republic.
5. D Charley, S. A. M. U. E. L. *The Forbidden Tree And The American Dream Of Willy Loman In Arthur Miller's Death Of A Salesman*.
6. SparkNotes Editors.(2007). *SparkNote on of Mice and Men*. Retrieved August 21, 2018, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/micemen>
7. Van Kirk, Susan. *CliffsNotes on of Mice and Men*. 23 Aug 2018</literature/o/of-mice-and-men/of-mice-and-men-at-a-glance>.
8. Shmoop Editorial Team. (2008, November 11). *of Mice and Men Themes*. Retrieved August 23, 2018, from <https://www.shmoop.com/of-mice-and-men/themes.html>.