

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Historical Context: Of Mice and Men

 EXPLORING Novels, 2003

Agriculture during the Great Depression

During the late [1930s](#), California was struggling not only with the economic problems of the Great Depression, but also with severe labor strife. Labor conflicts occurred on the docks and packing sheds and fields. Steinbeck wrote movingly about the struggles of migrant farm workers in three successive novels: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Agriculture as a working-culture was undergoing a historic change. In 1938, about half the nation's grain was harvested by mechanical combines that enabled five men to do the work that had previously required 350. Only a short time before, thousands of itinerant single men had roamed the western states following the harvests. Their labor had been essential to the success of the large farms. By 1900, about 125,000 migrants travelled along a route from Minnesota west to Washington state. Many traveled by rail in the empty boxcars that were later used to transport grain. At the turn of the century, the men were paid an average of \$2.50 to \$3 a day, plus room and board. The "room" was often a tent.

Wages had risen somewhat at the time of World War I, partly because of the Industrial Workers of the World, which established an 800-mile picket line across the Great Plains states. The "habitual" workers lived the migratory life for years until they grew too old to work. By the late 1930s there were an estimated 200,000 to 350,000 migrants: underpaid, underfed, and underemployed. The migrant worker was always partially unemployed, the nature of the occupation making his work seasonal. The maximum a worker could make was \$400 a year, with the average about \$300. Yet California's agricultural system could not exist without the migrant workers. It was a problem that would continue for decades. The farms in the state were more like food factories, the "[farmers](#)" were absentee owners, remaining in their city offices and hiring local managers to oversee the farming. In short, California's agriculture was not "farming" in the traditional sense. It was an industry like the lumber and oil industries. At the end of the 1930s, one-third of all large-scale farms in the [United States](#) were in California, reflecting the trend toward corporate farming. These farms had greatly fluctuating labor demands, and owners encouraged heavy immigration of low-wage foreign workers, usually Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. Mexicans began arriving in large numbers around 1910 and represented the largest percentage of the migrant workforce for about twenty years.

During these years, there were thousands of white Americans among the migrants, usually single men who followed the harvesting. Steinbeck writes about them in *Of Mice and Men*. These "bindle-stiffs," as they were known, had no union representation for several reasons: They had no money to pay dues, and they moved from location to location so often that it was difficult to organize them. In addition, American unionism, with its traditional craft setup, did not welcome unskilled workers like farm laborers. In 1930, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, a Communist-led union, organized the first effective drive among the migrants. During 1933, the group followed the migrants and harvests, organizing a nine-county cotton pickers' strike that affected 12,000 workers. By mid-1934, the union had led about fifty [strikes](#) involving 50,000 workers. The group's leaders claimed to have a membership of 21,000 and

said they had raised the basic hourly field wage from an average of 15 cents to 17.5 cents an hour in 1932 to an average of 27.5 cents in 1934.

In the summer of 1934, the union was broken up by the anti-Communist activities of employers and state authorities. Its last stand was at an apricot pickers' strike in June 1934. Deputies herded 200 strikers into a cattle pen, arrested some of the leaders, and transported the rest of the strikers out of the county. In trials, the union's president and secretary and six of their associates were convicted of treason. Five of the eight prisoners were later paroled and the other three were freed when an appellate court reversed the convictions in 1937. The existence of a strike was the greatest threat to California's growers. The harvest couldn't wait while negotiations dragged on. Crops had to be picked within a few days of ripening or the result would be financial ruin. This situation created much social unrest. In the 1930s, vigilante activity against strikers and organizers was bloody. Many workers, as well as a number of strike breakers and townspeople, were injured. Vigilantism was not uncommon in early union activities, but in California's farming industry it was particularly vicious, which was odd because the growers could not have existed without the migrants' labor. During peak seasonal demand, growers hired as many as 175,000 workers.

Yet after the harvests most of these workers were not needed. Growers argued that they could not be responsible for paying workers year-round when they were needed only for a few weeks or months. Steady work was impossible not only because of the seasonal nature of the industry, but also because jobs were widely separated and time was lost traveling on the road. Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* at a time when he was becoming involved in California's social and economic problems. In the novel, he wrote about a group of people, the white male migrant workers, who were to shortly disappear from [American culture](#). World War II absorbed many of the workers in the war effort in the 1940s. Although farm workers were generally exempt from the draft, the expansion of the defense industries to supply the U.S. military needs reduced the pool of surplus labor. The novel's continued popularity over the decades clearly shows that it has transcended its historical times.

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Themes and Construction: Of Mice and Men

 EXPLORING Novels, 2003

Themes

Idealism vs. Reality

Of Mice and Men tells the story of two simple men who try to escape homelessness, economic poverty, and emotional and psychological corruption. Otherwise, the fate of those who do not abandon the lives they lead as itinerant workers is bleak and dehumanizing. As George tells Slim, the mule driver: "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean." George and Lennie dream of owning a farm, but by the end of the novel the dream has failed. Their plan is doomed because human fellowship cannot survive in their world and also because their image of the farm is overly idealized. It is likely that even if they had obtained the farm, their lives would not have been as comfortable as they had imagined; they would not have enjoyed the fraternal harmony that is part of their dream. In fact, their dream of contentment in the modern world is impractical and does not accurately reflect the human condition. Crooks, the black stablehand, expresses his doubts about the dream. "Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkie' about it, but it's jus' in their head." Crooks is referring not only to literal ownership but to the dream of contentment about which these simple men fantasize. Implicit in the theme is the ironic idea that maturity involves the destruction of one's dreams. George "matures" by killing Lennie, thus destroying the dream that could not survive in modern civilization. George survives because he leaves behind his unrealistic dreams. Dreaming, however, is humanity's only defense against an indifferent world. The title of the novel itself implies that people are at the mercy of external forces beyond their control. Steinbeck writes with sincere compassion for the victims of these chaotic forces.

Alienation and Loneliness

Loneliness is a recurrent theme in the novel. "Guys like us," George says, "that work on the ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong noplac." Lennie replies: "But not us. And why. Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." The alternative to the companionship that George and Lennie share is loneliness. George frequently affirms the fraternity between them. "He's my... cousin," George tells the ranch boss. "I told his old lady I'd take care of him." The boss is suspicious of the bond between George and Lennie, and the other characters in turn also question this friendship: they have simply never seen anything like it. In their world, [isolation](#) is the norm. 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." Distrust is the quality of the modern world in which people live in alienation from one another. Later, the theme of loneliness is further explored in the solitude borne by Crooks and Curley's wife, who dies as a result of seeking human companionship. Both these characters crave company and, as Curley's wife says, "someone to talk to."

Despite everyone's suspicion, the friendship between George and Lennie remains solid. In fact, Candy becomes part of their dream to buy the little farm, and later Crooks also expresses his desire to become part of the expanding fellowship. This is the high point of optimism in regard to the theme of overcoming loneliness in the modern world, when it seems most likely that alienation and loneliness will be overcome.

After this point, however, the dream of fellowship on the farm begins to lose its promise, and 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 living cannot survive in a world ruled by loneliness, homelessness, and poverty.

This outcome also suggests that loneliness is an essential part of humanity's nature. This theme of loneliness has been implied from the beginning of the novel, when 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. Although the dream is doomed, the characters devote themselves to pursuing human fellowship.

Race and Racism

Somewhat related to the theme of loneliness is racism, which also results in personal isolation. Crooks, the old black man on the ranch, lives alone, ostracized by the ranch hands because of his race. The barrier of racial prejudice is briefly broken, however, when Crooks becomes an ally in the dream to buy a farm. Crooks has a bitter dignity and honesty that illustrate Steinbeck's own criticism of American society's failures in the Depression era of the [1930s](#).

Class Conflict

Although George and Lennie have their dream, they are not in a position to attain it. In addition to their own personal limitations, they are also limited by their position in society. Their idealistic dream is eventually destroyed by an unfeeling, materialistic, modern society. The tensions between the characters are inherent in the nature of American capitalism and its class system. Curley, the son of the ranch owner, is arrogant and always looking for a fight. This is not merely a personality trait. His position in society has encouraged this behavior; his real strength lies not in his fighting ability but in his power to fire any worker. Similarly, Carlson, the only skilled worker among the ranch hands, is arrogant and lacks compassion. Carlson would be difficult to replace in his job as a mechanic; therefore, he feels secure enough in his status to treat the other workers sadistically. This trait is seen when he orders Candy's dog to be shot and when he picks on Lennie. The other workers go along with Carlson because they are old or afraid of losing their jobs. Lennie's mental retardation also symbolizes the helplessness of people in a capitalistic, commercial, competitive society. In this way, Steinbeck illustrates the confusion and hopelessness of the Depression era. The poor were a class of people who suddenly had captured the imagination of American writers in the 1930s. This was an example of the shift in attitudes that occurred during the Depression. Previously, American fiction had been concerned with the problems of middle-class people. Steinbeck's novel was a sympathetic portrayal of the lives of the poorest class of working people, while exposing society's injustices and economic inequalities in the hope of improving their situation.

Mental Disability

Lennie's mental limitations also serve to illustrate another way in which people separate themselves from one another. Because of his handicap, Lennie is rejected by everyone at the ranch except George. The ranch hands are suspicious of Lennie and fear him when they recognize his physical strength and his inability to control himself. For example, when Crooks maliciously teases Lennie that George might

decide to abandon his friend and that Lennie would then end up in "the booby hatch," Lennie becomes enraged. Eventually, Crooks backs off in fear of what Lennie could do to hurt him. Despite Lennie's potential for hurting people, however, Steinbeck makes it clear that it is the malice, fear, and anger in other people that are to blame for Lennie's violent actions (Crooks torments Lennie out of his own frustration for being rejected because he is black). When Curly starts to hit Lennie for supposedly laughing at him, Lennie at first retreats and allows his face to become bloodied until George tells him he should fight back; and when Lennie accidentally kills Curly's wife, it is a direct result of her inappropriate advances toward him. Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie's handicap is therefore completely sympathetic; the other characters have only themselves to blame for provoking Lennie, who is merely a child in a world of selfish adults. That Lennie has to die at the novel's conclusion is a poignant commentary on the inability of the innocent to survive in modern society.

Loyalty

George is steadfastly loyal throughout the novel, honoring his commitment to take care of the retarded Lennie. After Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife, Curley forms a posse to lynch Lennie. George then steals a pistol and goes to the spot where he has told Lennie to hide in case there is trouble: the same spot where the novel begins. George then kills Lennie himself before the mob can find him so he can save Lennie from a lynching. Together the two men recite the dream of their farm for the last time. George mercifully kills Lennie with a shot to the head while Lennie is chanting the dream, unaware of what is about to happen to him. George, with all his personal limitations, is a man who has committed himself in a compassionate relationship. The grief he feels over the necessity of killing Lennie is also evidence of George's essential decency. Although the dream perishes, the theme of commitment achieves its strongest point in the novel's conclusion. Unlike Candy, who earlier abandoned responsibility for his old dog and allows Carlson to shoot the animal, George remains his brother's keeper. In his acceptance of complete responsibility for Lennie, George demonstrates the commitment necessary to join the ranks of Steinbeck's heroes.

Friendship

The one ingredient essential for the fulfillment of George's and Lennie's dream is friendship. And because the dream is so remarkable, that friendship must be special. 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 cannot survive on his own, and he needs George to guide and protect him. Without George, Lennie would live in a cave in the hills, as he sometimes threatens to do, or he would be institutionalized. George, for his part, complains regularly about having to take care of Lennie. His tolerance of Lennie also gives him a sense of superiority. At the same time, George feels a genuine affection for Lennie that he will not openly admit. Most importantly, without this friendship, neither George nor Lennie alone could sustain the dream, much less 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.

Construction

Structure

Of Mice and Men, with its highly restricted focus, is the first of Steinbeck's experiments with the novel-play form, which combines qualities of each genre. The novel thus needed few changes before appearing on

Broadway. The story is essentially comprised of three acts of two chapters each. Each chapter or scene contains few descriptions of place, character, or action. Thus, the novel's strength lies in part in its limitations. Action is restricted usually to the bunkhouse. The span of time is limited to three days: sunset Thursday to sunset Sunday, which intensifies the sense of suspense and drama.

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is generally objective—not identifying with a single character—and limited to exterior descriptions. The third-person narrative point of view creates a sense of the impersonal. With few exceptions, the story focuses on what can be readily perceived by an outside observer: a river bank, a bunkhouse, a character's appearance, card players at a table. The focus on time, too, is limited to the present: there are no flashbacks to events in the past, and the reader only learns about what has happened to Lennie and George before the novel's beginning through dialogue between the characters. Thoughts, recollections, and fantasies are expressed directly by the characters, except when Lennie hallucinates in Chapter 6 about seeing a giant rabbit and Aunt Clara.

Setting

Set in California's Salinas Valley, the story takes place on a large ranch during the Great Depression. The agricultural scene in California in the 1930s, particularly in Salinas Valley, was dominated by large collective farms, or "farm factories," owned by big landowners and banks. These farm factories employed hundreds of workers, many of whom were migrants. Small farms of a few hundred acres, such as the one Lennie and George dream about, were relatively scarce. On the large farms, low wages for picking fruit and vegetables often led to economic unrest. In September 1936, thousands of lettuce workers in the Salinas Valley went on strike over low wages. The situation grew tense, and an army officer was brought in to lead vigilantes against the strikers. The strike was crushed within a month. Steinbeck covered the strike as a reporter for the *San Francisco News*.

Symbolism

The most important symbol in the novel is the bank of the Salinas River, where the novel begins and ends. In the story's opening, when George and Lennie come to the riverbank, it serves as a symbol of retreat from the world to a natural state of innocence. In this first scene, George tells Lennie that he should return to this riverbank if there is trouble at the ranch where they plan to work. The riverbank is a "safe place" for the two characters. A second symbol is the rabbits: Lennie repeatedly asks George to tell him about the rabbits, which, when they are mentioned, also come to symbolize the safe place that George and Lennie desire and dream about. The fundamental symbol is the dream itself: "a little house and a couple of acres and a cow and some pigs." This ideal place keeps the two men bonded to each other and offers hope, however briefly, to two other men whom George and Lennie will meet the next day at the ranch. When George and Lennie arrive at the ranch, the bunkhouse and farm symbolize the essential emptiness of that world, offering only minimal physical security.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing, where events subtly hint at things to come, serves to heighten suspense in the novel. Lennie's rough handling of the mice and the puppy, the shooting of Candy's old dog, the crushing of Curley's hand, and the frequent appearances of Curley's wife all foretell future violence. Steinbeck tells the reader about the mice and puppy, as well as the scene in which Lennie breaks the bones in Curley's hand, so that when Lennie kills Curley's wife it is completely believable and convincing—and seemingly inevitable—that this could happen. Also, at the very beginning of the book, the reader learns that George

and Lennie had to leave Weed because Lennie got into trouble when he tried to touch a girl's dress. The incident in which Candy's dog is shot also foreshadows George's shooting of Lennie, an ironic comparison of the value placed on the life of a dog and a man.

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