

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Dorina-Daniela Vasiloiu, PhD

***Of Mice and Men* (1937)**

John Steinbeck

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Of Mice and Men was published in 1937, during the Great Depression, when workers migrated from place to place in search of work, which became even more scarce because of the automation of labor (e.g. the advent of the combine harvester).

Steinbeck started writing it in the form of a play script, a sort of 'novel-play', structured in three acts of two chapters each. Initially titled *Something that Happened*, Steinbeck changed it to *Of Mice and Men* after reading Robert Burns' poem *To a Mouse*, which refers to the narrator's regret for having destroyed the home of a mouse while plowing his field. Steinbeck also drew his inspiration from his personal experience and encounters with itinerant and migrant workers at his father's company. As for the character of Lennie, Steinbeck said in an interview for the *New York Times* in 1937: "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".

Steinbeck's "little book", as he called it, has been proposed for censorship for its racist and vulgar language many times, and appears on the American Library Association's list of the Most Challenged Books of twenty-first century. Steinbeck also wrote the script for the stage version of the story, and the production was chosen as Best Play in 1938 by the New York Drama Critics' Circle. In 1939 the story was also adapted for the big screen, with a second adaptation being released in 1992.

MAIN CHARACTERS

George Milton	A migrant worker, who travels with and looks after his companion, Lennie.
Lennie Small	A migrant worker, who suffers from mental impairment and follows George everywhere.
Curley	Curley is the son of the owner of the ranch where George and Lennie find new work.
Curley's wife	Curley's wife is a young woman who arouses intense jealousy in her husband.
Candy	Candy is an old ranch worker, who shares the bunkhouse with the other workers.
Crook	Crook is the stable buck, who is discriminated against because he is black.
Slim	Slim is the skinner and the unspoken leader of the workmen.
Carlson	Carlson is one of the ranch workers, who shares the bunkhouse with the others.

SYNOPSIS

The story is set in the Soledad Valley, California, during the Great Depression. George Milton and Lennie Small are two migrant workers on their way to work at a nearby ranch. The situation is complicated by the boss's daughter-in-law, known as Curley's wife, who keeps paying visits to the workmen's bunkhouse to provoke her husband. George warns Lennie, who is cognitively impaired and has a very short memory, to keep away from her. One day, however, she comes to see Lennie in

the barn and he accidentally kills her. Realizing that he has done something bad, Lennie hides in the brush by the river and waits for George. George arrives some time later, and while Lennie gleefully listens to the story of their dream house, George sneaks his gun behind his head and shoots him dead to avoid his companion's death at the hands of a revengeful and enraged Curley.

PLOT

Lennie and George A few miles south of Soledad, two men stop by the Salinas River. Lennie drinks water from a green pool by the path in spite of George's concerns that the water may make him sick.

The little mouse George suspects that his friend is hiding something, and Lennie reluctantly admits to holding a dead mouse. Lennie begs George to let him have the mouse, but George would not hear it. George reminds Lennie that that he must be on his best behavior at the new ranch.

A childhood memory George reminisces about how Clara, Lennie's aunt, stopped giving mice to him to play with because he always killed them. Lennie feels upset because he cannot understand how the little mice died as he would just pet them.

George's frustration George loses his patience with Lennie and says his life "alone" could have been much better if he had not had to look after him. Seeing George so angry, Lennie asks him if he should leave for good. Lennie's words make George realize he may have been too harsh on him.

The dream George reflects on how migrant workers like them feel lonely. Lennie excitedly encourages George to tell him how their story will be different as they will look after each other on their own farm.

Reminder George points to the brush as the hiding place for Lennie if he happens to get in trouble again. George repeats the instruction for Lennie not to forget that he has to wait there until he comes for him.

The new work place The two friends arrive at the bunkhouse where they are shown to their beds. After a short while, the boss arrives, asking for their work slips, and gets suspicious as George keeps answering for Lennie.

The boss's son Curley comes into the bunkhouse looking for his wife. He "stares levelly" at Lennie and tells him to answer only when he is spoken to. After Curley walks out, George wonders what his problem is since Lennie did nothing to upset him. Candy explains that Curley is the boss's son, who, because of his small build, hates "big guys" like Lennie. George then warns Lennie to keep away from Curley.

Curley's wife A young woman suddenly appears in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looking for Curley. Fascinated, Lennie watches her, whereas George avoids any eye contact with her and tells her that Curley has just left. As soon as she leaves, George grabs Lennie by the ear and warns him to keep away from Curley's wife.

A game of solitaire Slim appears in the doorway and engages in conversation with George while playing solitaire. Slim finds it uncommon that two guys travel around together, but George explains that even if Lennie is not bright, he is a good worker and a "nice fella" and they "kinda look after each other".

Carlson's plan Carlson enters the bunkhouse and asks Slim if he could give one of his puppies to Candy. He suggests that Candy should shoot his old dog "who stinks like hell" and raise the new puppy.

Lennie's story Lennie looks excitedly at George to make him understand that he wants one of Slim's puppies, too. George tells Slim about Lennie's life story. How his Aunt Clara raised him up and how

when she died, he took the responsibility of looking after him. George confesses that they had to leave Weed, the previous workplace, because Lennie was accused of rape as he would not let go of a girl's dress. George reassures Slim that Lennie did not hurt the girl, though.

The shooting Carlson insists on getting rid of Candy's old dog since they cannot sleep because of its stinking smell. A little later, Carlson grabs his pistol, takes the dog outside and shoots it dead.

The dream Lennie asks George to tell him again about their "little place". George starts describing their little farm with a room of their own fruit trees and animals, especially rabbits. Candy offers his savings as a contribution to the purchase of the place, hoping that he will share it with them.

Jealousy and fight Slim enters the bunk house followed by Curley, Carlson and Whit. Slim is upset with Curley because of the latter's insinuation that he may know where his wife is. Seeing Lennie, who is still "smiling with delight at the memory of the ranch", Curley bursts out in a rage and starts hitting him. George orders a confused Lennie to fight back, and Lennie breaks Curley's fist. Slim advises Curley to save his honor by saying that he has caught his hand in a machine.

Making a new friend Lennie appears in the doorway of the harness room where Crook lives. Crook reacts to Lennie's intrusion virulently. He challenges Lennie to think about what he would do if George did not come back. Seeing Lennie's misery, Crook has a change of tone and reassures him that George will return. Candy also comes in, which makes Crook feel uneasy because "guys don't come into a colored man's room very much". They start talking about the dream house.

An unwanted visit Curley's wife suddenly appears in the doorway looking for her husband, and makes some offending remarks directed at them as they urge her to go away. Lennie, however, watches her "fascinated". She then tells Lennie that she is glad he has busted up Curley's hand and disappears in the dark. George returns and disapproves of Lennie's being in Crook's room.

An unpremeditated killing On Sunday afternoon Lennie sits in the barn, looking at the little dead puppy. He rocks himself "back and forth in his sorrow", afraid that George will not allow him to tend rabbits if he finds out. Curley's wife comes in the barn, too. Lennie tries to follow George's instructions and avoids talking to her, but Curley's wife sits next to him and starts confiding to him. She tells him how lonely her life is with Curley and about her shattered dream of becoming an actress. At some point, she boasts about her "soft and fine hair" and places Lennie's hand on her head. Lennie's strong stroke makes her cry angrily. In a panic, Lennie covers her mouth and nose. As she struggles to escape his strong grip, Lennie becomes apprehensive and breaks her neck. Hearing noises outside, Lennie realizes he has done something bad and runs away.

Finding the dead body Candy comes looking for Lennie in the barn when he discovers Curley's wife's dead body. He rushes out and after a short while he returns with George, who thinks that Lennie will inevitably be locked up. Slim, Curley and the other workers arrive at the murder scene. Curley bursts into a rage, blaming Lennie for his wife's death and goes out looking for his shotgun.

Organizing the chase team George tries to make Slim understand that Lennie did not do it out of "meanness", and that they could bring him in to be locked up. Slim nods, concerned that Curley cannot be stopped from taking his revenge. Carlson runs back in, accusing Lennie of having stolen his Luger. Curley follows him, carrying a shotgun in his good hand. He orders the men to shoot Lennie dead as soon as they see him and sends Whitt to town to get a cop. To avoid any suspicion, George follows them.

Lennie's hallucinations Lennie waits for George by the brush near the river. Suddenly, he thinks he sees Aunt Clara, frowning at him and scolding him for disappointing George. Then a gigantic rabbit appears to tell him that he is not "fit" to tend rabbits. The rabbit repeatedly states that George is going to leave him, which terrifies Lennie.

Lennie's death George comes quietly out of the brush and reassures Lennie that he is not going to abandon him. Lennie listens "entranced" to George's story about their dream house. After some

hesitation, George shoots Lennie in the back of his head. Slim takes George out for a drink, reassuring him that his deed was justifiable.

THEMES

American Dream A major theme that recurs throughout the story is The American dream. It is George's and Lennie's dream of belonging to a place of their own where they can work only for themselves, and where Lennie can "tend the rabbits". As they picture it, their "little place" will give them not only a special social status amongst others, who "ain't got nothing to look ahead to", but also food, stability and freedom to decide how many work hours to put in every day. They will also be able to keep a good eye on the crop. As George has it, "we'd know what come of our planting". Whenever they talk about their shared dream, they both remain "entranced" at the prospect. Despite his otherwise rough attitude, George's voice grows "warmer" whenever he contemplates this "future". For Lennie, "the memory of the ranch" has a soothing role. At the end of the story, it even anaesthetizes his instincts as he is so absorbed in the dream of "how it's gonna be" that he has no inkling about George's intentions.

Solitude From the outset, loneliness pervades the characters' spirit and life. On the linguistic level, the name of the valley, "Soledad" is the Spanish word for 'solitude'. On the story level, the protagonists chat around a card game of *solitaire* (>*solitarius*, the Latin word for 'alone'). Although the protagonists share the bunkhouse, they appear isolated from one another. For example, Lennie's mental disability cuts him off the real world. George remarks that ranch workers like them "are the loneliest guys in the world". However, George sometimes wishes he could travel alone. For him, 'loneliness' is synonymous with a "swell time" without the responsibility of looking after Lennie. Slim's quiet and self-assured character makes him stand out amongst the other workers on the ranch. Candy's physical incapacity caused by old age and injury also isolates him in a constant state of fear that he will become a disposable burden. Beneath the self-confidence Curley's wife displays in front of the men, she feels lonely, as she confides to Lennie. Crooks is another character whose life is marked by solitude and isolation because of his race. He lives alone in the barn as the others have refused to share the bunkhouse with a black person.

Disability The theme of disability is also central to the story. In an increasingly industrialized society, individuals like Lennie, Candy and Crooks do not fit in. Disability takes a mental form with the character of Lennie, and a physical form with Candy (work accident) and Crook ("cripple"). Disability is shown no sympathy and treated as inconvenience. The most notable example of this is Lennie's execution. As for physical incapacity, Carlson's cold-blooded execution of Candy's old dog and Candy's own fear of sharing his dog's fate when he is "no good to himself nor nobody else" are reflective of the then-attitude towards disability in society. Although Candy has lost his right hand while working on the ranch, there is no work security for him.

Violence The theme of violence recurs during almost every important story event. It is evident in the characters' language, but also in their aggressive reactions towards one another. For instance, George associates loneliness with violence. In his view, "the guys that go around on the ranches alone... get mean" and want "to fight all the time". Furthermore, Curley's inferiority complex because of his small build makes him take an instant dislike to Lennie, whom he attacks violently when he has the chance. Whereas Curley's violence is gratuitous, Lennie's acts of violence are unconscious as he is entirely unaware of his strength. George keeps justifying his friend's "bad things" as a consequence of his cognitive problems and not "meanness".

Racism Steinbeck's novella also explores the theme of racism. The abusive treatment based on color skin is presented through the character of Crooks. During his first unexpected encounter with Lennie in the barn where he has been isolated because he is not "wanted" in the bunkhouse, Crooks reveals that the reason for that is his skin color. He is not allowed to join the men's card game for the same reason and because of the smell they associate with his color. Feeling bitter about this offensive misperception, Crooks takes his frustration out on Lennie: "Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me". As soon as he realizes Lennie's inability to understand his problem, he changes the tone and says, "This is just a nigger talkin', an' a busted-back nigger". Crook's referring to himself in such derogatory terms echoes the way his white co-workers and employers treat him. A very relevant example is the way Curley's wife talks to him: "You keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny". Crooks' immediate reaction is to turn into a

submissive and depersonalized individual who has “reduced himself to nothing”, with “no personality, no ego”.

Crime Steinbeck’s approach to the theme of crime in *Of Mice and Men* is an extremely complex one. George’s mercy killing of Lennie at the end of the story has raised some controversial debate among critics, some of whom considering that George’s action is a metaphorical support for euthanasia. On the other hand, Lennie unintentionally kills little animals, and eventually, Curley’s wife. The way his emotional distress after each such episode is described arouses the reader’s sympathy and understanding his deeds in light of his disability. It is Steinbeck’s great interest in philosophy that is reflected in the way he has addressed the question of crime and the extent to which it may be justified. This thought-provoking issue is explored from different sides (Lennie’s, George’s, Curley’s and the society), but no definite answer is offered, so the reader is left reflecting upon the ethics and justice behind Lennie’s final punishment.

Relationship The characters in *Of Mice and Men* are solitary individuals, as implied even by the *solitaire* game they play. With the exception of Slim, who comes across as the most fair-minded and strong personality, the others seem stuck in their personal dramas, which makes them incapable of establishing interpersonal relationships based on understanding and support for a fellow worker. The dysfunctional relationship between those living on the ranch may be exemplified as follows: Carlson deeply hurts Candy by shooting his dog; Curley and his wife come looking for each other on the farm but fail to connect and communicate; Crooks is not allowed to join the other men in the bunkhouse because he is black. George and Lennie’s type of relationship is even more striking. Taking over the responsibility of Lennie’s care from Aunt Clara, George gradually appears to have developed conflicting feelings of affection for his travel partner. Although George gives Lennie a hard time every time he does a ‘bad thing’, he remains by his side until the end. He is not impassive to Lennie’s repetitive begging for the dream place story, and his voice even gets warmer in the process. As the boss and Slim notice, their coming together is unusual. However, the lack of intentionality in George and Lennie’s relationship turns it into some kind of unspoken friendship: in his moments of anger, George wishes he would travel alone, but regrets saying that as soon as he sees how much his words affect Lennie; Lennie, on the other hand, has no understanding of social relations, but trusts George completely.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

George George is “small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features”. He also has a well-defined strong physique. George cares for Lennie, whose cognitive impairment makes him wholly dependent on him. In spite of his rough attitude towards Lennie, and frustration with his constant moments of forgetfulness that require frequent repetitions of instructions, George seems to have developed willy-nilly some kind of affection for his companion.

Frustrated Lennie’s dependence and trouble-making actions are a source of constant frustration for George. His annoyance is clearly conveyed through his body language and the way he talks to Lennie when doing something bad: for example, he “stares morosely”, “scowls over”, “says sharply”, looks down “in despair”, “explodes” or talks “furiously”. George’s lack of patience and, at times, exaggerated reactions against Lennie stem from the unrelenting pressure caused by their status as migrant workers. His bad temper and unhappiness do not relate only to Lennie, but also to the lack of material comfort and dependence on an employer to give them a job. George’s dream is to own a little farm where he and Lennie can lead their lives free of constraints. The thought generates bitterness, but, at the same time, hope and contentment.

Caring George’s soft side and affection for Lennie is evident in the language that he uses when he refers to him (e.g., “‘Poor bastard’, he said softly”), and in the way he defends him in front of the others (e.g., “course, he ain’t mean”). One of the most illustrative examples is the moment George realizes that Lennie is hiding a dead mouse in his hand. Fed up with Lennie’s irresponsible behaviour, George bursts out and says to him angrily: “I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an’ let you have fun”. However, as soon as he sees Lennie’s “anguished face”, he feels ashamed of himself. Then Lennie tries to soften him by saying that he could go away and “leave him alone”. Realizing how “mean” he has been, George starts telling Lennie about their dream ranch and rabbits he will get to pet to make him happy.

Cold-blooded The final scene, when George finds the strength to pull the trigger and execute Lennie, reveals the coldest side of his character. George goes to the brush where he finds Lennie in terrible distress. Here he assures him by telling him the same story of their dream ranch and how they will never separate. As Lennie “giggles with happiness” and is completely unaware of his friend’s intentions, George finds it difficult at first to control the shake in the hand holding the gun. However, on hearing Curley and his men approaching, he steadies his hand and shoots Lennie dead. When Carlson asks him how he did it and whether it was Lennie who had stolen his gun, George replies that he “just done it” and lets him believe his version of the story. Although deeply marked by the event, George stands up and goes for a drink with Slim.

Lennie Lennie is “a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders”. He walks “heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws”. Lennie likes touching everything that is soft and dreams about the ranch that he and George will own one day. His mental impairment is so severe that he cannot control his strength when he pets little animals. To George’s despair, Lennie ends up killing almost everything that he lays his hands on, even Curley’s wife.

Instinctive Lennie may not understand the gravity of his acts, but he senses when he has done something wrong and its consequences. He knows that his having petted a little mouse to death, for example, will upset George, who will then not let him pet animals again. That is why he tries to hide his little victims. There are instances when Lennie may get anxious when in trouble, but somehow trusts that George will never abandon him. One such example is when George finds him hiding a dead little mouse in his hands and gets angry with him. Lennie asks his friend if he should leave him alone for good. Lennie pictures himself in a cave where he says he will be able to pet mice at his pleasure. This makes George feel ashamed. Lennie does not have a manipulative nature, but he senses that his words will make George forgive him. When George excuses himself by saying that he was just joking, Lennie “avoids the bait” and instinctively uses his “advantage” to soften George even more.

Involuntarily rough Lennie is obsessed with soft things, and touching them gives him great joy. When, for example, the mouse and later on the puppy he pets die at his “huge paws”, Lennie gets frustrated with the animals for being “too little” rather than with his rough handling of them. He cannot bring his physical strength down to the level of these animals. It is his cognitive impairment that prevents him from coordinating his physical force when he pets ‘subjects’, as occurs with the girl in Weed and later on, Curley’s wife.

Childish Lennie knows “no rules” and has to be repeated instructions all the time. His cognitive impairment prevents him from remembering them too long. When Crooks, for instance, asks him to imagine what he would do without George, Lennie reacts like a child terrified at the prospect of abandonment. Another relevant example is what seems to be a hide-and-seek game that he plays with George whenever he tries to hide the little dead animals. Despite his ‘bear’-like build, Lennie keeps asking George to retell him the story of their dream house and the rabbits he will get to pet. Not only does this story get all his attention, but it also comforts him and makes him very happy.

Curley’s wife Curley’s wife embodies some important aspects regarding women’s status in the American society around the 1930s. Her nameless character illustrates her status as an objectified commodity as she is only referred to as Curley’s wife. Except for her moment of vulnerability with Lennie, her character is rendered mostly through the ranch workers’ perspective and the short conversations she has with them. As a result, she comes across as a woman of questionable morals who, with the exception of Lennie and Slim, is shown little respect despite the fact that she is the boss’s daughter-in-law. Or, as George perceives her, she is “a jail bait all set on the trigger”. Curley’s wife is a beautiful young woman with full lips, “wide-spaced eyes” and “soft and fine” hair. She is also perceptive and uses irony as subtle criticism of her husband’s character and her troubled married life.

Coquettish Curley’s wife has a flirtatious manner when she talks with the men on the ranch, especially Slim. Her appearance is in stark contrast with the ranch surroundings as she wears heavy make-up, red nail polish and keeps her hair “hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages”. She comes to the bunkhouse several times under the pretense that she is looking for her husband. She is aware of the effect she has on men, and she deliberately uses her body to provoke them. For example, she smiles “archly”, “twitches her body” or leans “against the door frame so that her body was thrown

forward". Apart from Slim, who gently greets her with "hi, good-lookin'", Lennie is the only one who gives her beauty credit and stares at her in awe: "Gosh, she was purty".

Frustrated Curley's wife's heavy make-up may be interpreted as her desperate attempt to make herself visible in a male-dominated environment. From her chats with Lennie, especially, she appears to suffer from a lack of affection and attention. As she confesses to Lennie that Curley is "not a good fella", her visits to the bunkhouse may represent a kind of psychological torture, an indirect manner of retaliation against his abusive treatment. She takes her frustration out on Crooks, whom she calls offensive names and threatens with hanging unless he minds his place. For example, during one of her visits to the barn where she finds Crooks, Lennie and Candy, she gets indignant at their urge that she should leave Crooks' room. Filled with frustration for having to spend Saturday night by herself, she has an intense burst of anger: "Sat'iday night. Ever'body out doin' som'pin'... An' what am I doin'? Standin' here talkin' to a bunch of bindle stiffs — a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep".

Vulnerable Curley's wife shows her sensitive and vulnerable side to Lennie when she finds him staring at the dead puppy in the barn. She talks to him "in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away". She recalls her broken dream of becoming an actress, how she met an actor when she was very young, but her "ol' lady wouldn't let" her join his show. Then another man promised to "put [her] in the movies" and he said that she was "a natural". She has not heard from him since he left for Hollywood, so she thinks that her old lady must have stolen his letter. She then married Curley because her old lady was standing in the way of "mak[ing] something of [her]self". The moment she confides to Lennie that her husband "isn't a nice fella", she moves closer to him. This physical approach to someone who she thinks is finally listening to her is indicative of her long-desired need for protection, safety and understanding.