An Historical Introduction to of Mice and Men and a Discussion of its Major Themes

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A Brief Historical Introduction

John Steinbeck wrote Of Mice and Men midway through the 1930s, the most creative decade of his career. During the time he was becoming increasingly concerned about current social and economic problems in California, and he published three successive novels about farm workers, each distinctive in tone and conception.

Of Mice and Men was a deliberate change from his previous book, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), an imaginative interpretation of a contemporary farm strike. In the new project he set out to work within a narrow framework, concentrating on a small number of characters in carefully detailed settings, telling his story as economically and dramatically as possible. He explained that he was teaching himself to write for the theatre, and in fact he soon did translate the novel into a play.

The subject was less controversial than that of his previous book. He was writing about people who were isolated in the society of their time, who belonged to a group that was fast disappearing from the American scene. Only a short time before, thousands of itinerant single men had roamed the Western states following the harvests. Their labor was essential to the success of the bonanza grain-growing enterprises that had been started in the second half of the nineteenth century and had proliferated so rapidly that by the year 1900 some 125,000 threshers were migrating along a "belt" that extended from the Brazos Bottoms in Texas north to Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and from Minnesota west to the state of Washington. Many of them traveled by rail, arriving in the fields in empty boxcars that were later used to transport the grain. In the early years they were paid an average wage of $2.50 to $3.00 a day plus room and board. The "room" was frequently a tent : living conditions were spartan. But wages rose at the time of the First World War when the price of wheat was high, partly through the action of the Industrial Workers of the World, which established an eight-hundred-mile picket line across the Great Plains states.

In California, where grain was the chief farm commodity in the 1870s and 1880s before the advent of irrigated culture, some of the early harvesters were disappointed miners returning from the goldfields. In the social and occupational hierarchy they were on a level considerably below the mule drivers who, like Steinbeck's character Slim, were valued for their skill in handling as many as twenty animals "with a single line" and who were generally employed permanently on the ranches.

Steinbeck's recognition of the status of the mule driver epitomizes his re-creation of a working culture that was undergoing a historic change even as he wrote about it. In 1938, the year *Of Mice and Men* was published, about half the nation's grain was harvested by mechanical combines that enabled 5 men to do the work that had been done formerly by 350. The single farm workers who traveled by bus, were disappearing. They were being replaced by whole families migrating in cars, like the Joad family in Steinbeck's next novel, *The Grapes of Wrath.*

The physical background for Of Mice and Men came from Steinbeck's own early years in a California agricultural valley. Outside his native city of Salinas, eighty miles south of San Francisco, he spent his high school summers working the fields and orchards of an uncle's ranch, and dropping out of college one year he worked as a bindlestiff (like George and Lenny) where he gathered valuable impressions and first hand knowledge of their lives and livelihood.

Basic Themes and Biblical Allegory of the Story

Of Mice and Men is a short novel in six scenes presented in description-dialogue-action form that approximates stage drama in its effect. The time scheme runs from Thursday evening through Sunday evening-exactly three days in sequence. Most of the characters are unskilled migratory workers and Steinbeck focuses on two such laborers who dream of one day saving up enough money to buy a small farm of their own. One of these is George Milton, small of stature, clever, sensitive, compassionate ; the other is Lennie Small, who is oversized, mentally retarded, enormously strong, and prone to getting into serious trouble. Early in the story the prospect of their ever realizing their dream seems remote, but as the action develops (they meet a crippled bunkhouse worker, Candy, who wants to go in with them on the scheme, and who offers to chip in his life savings), the probability of fulfillment increases. If the three homeless migrants pool their salaries at the end of the current month, they can quit their jobs and move on to their farm, which as Steinbeck emphasizes repeatedly, is a place of abundance and a refuge from the hardships of life. Their plan to find a place of their own is straight out of the American Dream. They set down the details in a kind of litany which George recites while Lennie chimes in with the chorus. They repeat the comforting words from time to time like an incantation to ward off trouble and rekindle hope. In the last scene-a final irony in a work compounded of ironies-George, in order to calm Lennie, utters the familiar refrain, which becomes an epitaph for his friend ; their best laid plans having gone astray. I discuss the theme of finding a home, a place of one's own later on in this paper.

In the first scene by the river he introduces the mute evidence of the past : the ash pile left by previous campers and the tree limb overhanging the water, worn smooth by tramps who have come there over the years to jungle up (make camp). Linking the past

with the present, George and Lennie make their entrance in the tradition of bindle stiffs, carrying blankets on their backs. The story then moves into the opening dialogue, justly famous in American Literature, through which we come to know and believe in the touching partnership of the moronic giant and his gruff protector.

The next scene at the ranch opens with a description of the empty bunkhouse with its tiers of beds, each with an apple box nailed to the wall to hold the meager possessions of men who traveled light. The place is not particularly clean. Flies dart through the motes of dust stirred up by the push broom of Candy, the old swamper ; a can of bug powder suggests lice or bedbugs in the mattress ticking. This description amplifies the desire of the men to find a home of their own, one free from the filth and infestation of the bunkhouse, free also from the transient nature of a bunkhouse, filled with anonymous men merely passing through. The characters who come in one by one create the social dimension of the place.

This rough lodging in which nothing has been provided beyond the bare necessities is governed by the harsh code of the men who live there for a week, or month or year. It is a society intolerant of weakness or difference. Old Candy, helpless to stop the shooting of his old dog, knows he too will one day be banished when he's no longer useful. The killing of Candy's old dog is a significant episode which anticipates George's mercy killing of Lennie at the conclusion. "I ought to have shot that dog myself," says Candy later. "I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog. "George shoots Lennie out of compassion and the knowledge that Curly and his posse would have either done the same in a more brutal fashion or else have him thrown in an insane asylum to be incarcerated for the rest of his life.

Crooks, the black stable hand, is excluded except on Christmas when the boss brings in a gallon of whiskey for the entire crew. The rest of the year Crooks plays horsehoes outside with the others, but when they come indoors to sleep, he goes off alone to his bed in the harness room of the barn.

Women are not welcome in the male enclave. Curley's wife, wandering around the ranch in a wistful quest for some kind of human contact, is stereotyped by the men, whose experience of women comes from "old Suzy" and her girls in town. Curley's wife (in the novel she has no other name) goes along with the typecasting by playing the vamp, inflaming her jealous husband, who, as the son of the boss, is as powerful as he is vicious. It is on this explosive situation that the plot turns. Lennie, sensing trouble too complicated for a simple mind to unravel, begs to leave after George tells him that Curly's wife is "poison" and "jail bait."

Steinbeck had a different view of her, as he explained in a letter to the actress who played the role in the Broadway production of the play. Curley's wife acts seductively because she "knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because someone finds her sexually attractive." But her pose is deceptive. "Her moral training

was most rigid." She was a virgin until her marriage and had had no sexual experience outside her unfulfilling union with Curley. She had grown up "in an atmosphere of fighting and suspicion" and had learned to be hard to cover her fright. But she is fundamentally a "nice, kind girl" who has a natural trustfulness..... If anyone-a man or a woman-ever gave her a break-treated her like a person-she would be a slave to that person."

Steinbeck captured this aspect of her character in her final scene with Lennie. In the presence of this childlike man she drops her defenses and expresses her real feelings. Her rambling monologue of blighted hopes and tawdry fantasies is, in effect, a last confession.

Steinbeck has prepared his readers for the shocking climax of the novel through his portrait of Lennie. He might have created a caricature in the mental defective who crushes soft creatures in his powerful hands. He had worked with a real-life Lennie, he told reporters when he was writing the stage version of Of Mice and Men. "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." The fictional Lennie is passive and non-violent. Would he be capable of a murderous rage if George was threatened? Perhaps. It is through his connection with his intelligent partner that he becomes a credible character. In the opening scene Steinbeck establishes the dynamics of their relationship, in which George's exasperated bossing of Lennie appears as a form of protectiveness that masks their mutual dependence.

Discussion of the Basic Themes in Of Mice and Men

The title of the story has a two-fold application and significance. First, it refers to naturalistic details within the texture of the novella: Lennie likes to catch mice and stroke their fur with his fingers. This is a particularly important point for two reasons: it establishes Lennie's fatal weakness for stroking soft things and, since he invariably kills the mice he is petting, it foreshadows his deadly encounter with Curley's wife. Second, the title is, of course, a fragment from the poem by Robert Burns, which gives emphasis to the idea of the futility of human endeavor or the vanity of human wishes.

Loneliness is a recurrent theme in novel, articulated in George's speech that begins: "Guys like us, that work on the ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place."

"But not us," Lennie replies. "And why. Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why."

Viewed in the light of its mythic and allegorical implications, Of Mice and Men is a story about the nature of man's fate in a fallen world, with particular emphasis on the question: Is man destined to live alone, a solitary wanderer on the face of the earth, or is it the fate of man to care for man, to go his way in companionship with another? This is the same theme that occurs in the Old Testament of the bible, as early as chapter 4 of Genesis, immediately following the Creation and Expulsion. In effect, the question

Steinbeck poses is the same question Cain poses to the Lord : "Am I my brother's keeper ?" This theme is of course reenacted in great detail later on in Steinbeck's classic *East of Eden*. All the while Steinbeck develops the affectionate symbiosis of George and Lennie, showing their brotherly mutual concern and faithful companionship, he emphasizes through the voices and opinions of the other ranch hands how rare and different their camaraderie is. In contrast to these two, the other men are solitary souls without friends or companions. When they get paid they go to the town of Soledad to spend their money on drinking, gambling and whoring. It is certainly no coincidence that Soledad means solitude in Spanish.

Steinbeck's treatment of this theme is entirely free from a sense of contrivance, all the details in *Of mice and Men* seem natural in the context and organically related to the whole ; but note that in addition to presenting Lennie and George as men, who like the cursed Cain, till the soil and derive no benefits from their labor, he also manages to have them on the "run" when they are introduced in the first scene - this no doubt to have his characters correspond as closely as possible to the biblical passage : "a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be..."

To the calamity of homelessness and economic futility Steinbeck later adds the psychological soul corruption that is the consequence of solitary existence. In scene 3 George tells Slim, the mule driver on the ranch : "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean." And Slim agrees with George.

Again, in scene 4, the Negro stable buck Crooks tells Lennie : "A guy needs somebody - to be near him...A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he with you. I tell ya, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely and he gets sick."

This is Steinbeck's portrait of Cain in the modern world, or Man Alone, whose fate is so severe that he may feel compelled to echo the words of Cain to the Lord : "My punishment is more than I can bear." In *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck gives us the case history of two simple mortals who try to escape their homelessness and their economic and psychological despair which Biblical scripture embodies in the curse of Cain. At the same time Steinbeck advances the surface plot, he is busy developing the allegorical level of his story by suggesting that the attitude of Cain (I know not : Am I my brother's keeper ?") has become universal. Even the sympathetic and understanding Slim expresses some wonder at the Lennie-George fraternity. "Ain't many guys travel around together," Slim says in scene 2. "I don't know why. Maybe ever'body in the whole damned world is scared of each other." This too, as Steinbeck interprets the biblical story, is a part of Cain"s curse : distrust. Later on, in order to give the theme of aloneness another dimension, Steinbeck stresses the solitude of Crooks and Curley's wife, both of whom express a craving for company and "someone to talk to."

Notwithstanding the fact that they are obviously swimming against the current, Lennie and George continue to reaffirm their solidarity all along, right up to and including the last moments of Lennie's life in scene 6. Here, a big rabbit, which Lennie in his disturbed state of mind has hallucinated, tells the half-wit fugitive that George is sick of him and is going to go away and leave him. "He won't !" Lennie cries. "He won't do nothing like that. I know George. Me an' him travels together." Actually Steinbeck's novella advances and develops, ebbs and flows, around the basic image of the Lennie-George relationship. Almost all of the characters react to it in one way or another as the successive scenes unfold. In scenes 1, 2 and 3, despite the discouraging opinions of outsiders, the companionship remains intact and unthreatened. Midway into scene 3 the partnership undergoes augmentation when Candy is admitted into the scheme to buy the little farm. Late in scene 4 Crooks offers himself as another candidate for the fellowship of soul brothers and dreamers. This is the high point of optimism as regards the main theme of the story ; this is the moment when a possible reversal of the curse of Cain seems most likely, as Steinbeck suggests that the answer to the Lord's question might be, "Yes, I am my brother's keeper." If we arrive at this point with any comprehension of the author's purposes, we find ourselves brought up short by the idea : what if this Lennie-George-Candy-Crooks fraternity were to become universal ?

But later in the same scene, the entrance of Curley's wife signals the turning point as the prospects for the idea of brotherhood-as-a-reality begin to fade and darken. As throughout the story she represents a force that destroys men and at the same time invites men to destroy her, as she will finally in scene 5 offer herself as a temptation which Lennie cannot resist, so in scene 4 Curley's wife sows the seeds that eventually disrupt the fellowship. Entering into the discussion in Crook's room in the stable, she insults Crooks, Candy and Lennie, laughs at their dream farm, and threatens to invent the kind of accusation that will get Crooks lynched. Crooks, reminded of his position of impotence in a white man's society, immediately withdraws his offer to participate in the George-Lennie-Candy farming enterprise. But Crooks's withdrawal while extremely effective as social criticism, is much more. It represents an answer to the question Steinbeck is considering all along : Is man meant to make his way alone or accompanied ? Obviously this is one occasion, among many others in the story, when Steinbeck suggests the answer. Crooks's hope for fraternal living is short-lived. At the conclusion of the scene he sinks back into his Aloneness.

From this point on, even though the dream of fellowship on the farm remains active, the real prospects for its fulfillment decline drastically. In scene 5, after George and Candy discover the lifeless body of Curley's wife, they both face the realization that the little farm is now unattainable and the partnership dissolved. Actually the plan was doomed to failure from the beginning ; for fraternal living cannot long survive in a world dominated by the Aloneness, homelessness, and economic futility which Steinbeck

presents as the modern counterpart of Cain's curse. Immediately following his discovery of Curley's wife's body, George delivers a speech that dwells on the worst possible aftermath of Lennie's misdeed ; and that is not the wrath of Curley or the immolation of Lennie or the loss of the dream farm, but the prospect of George's becoming a Man Alone, homeless, like all the others and a victim as well of economic futility : "I'll work my month an I'll take my fifty bucks and I'll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I'll set in some poolroom til ever'body goes home. An then I'll come back an' work another month an' I'll have fifty bucks more." This speech represents the true climax of the novella, for it answers the question which is Steinbeck's main interest throughout. Now we know the outcome of the Lennie-George experiment in fellowship, as we know the Aloneness of man's essential nature. In subtle ways, of course, Steinbeck has been hinting at this conclusion all along, as, for example, in the seven references spaced throughout scenes 2 and 3 to George's playing solitaire in the bunkhouse. In the opening line of the story, when the author establishes his setting "a few miles south of Soledad." (Solitude)

But there are still other suggested meanings inherent in the dream farm and the failure of the dream. The plan is doomed not only because human fellowship cannot survive in the post-Cain world, but also because the image of the farm, as conceived by George and Lennie and Candy is overly idealized, the probability being that life, even if they obtained the farm, would not consist of the comfort, plenty, and interpersonal harmony they envision. The fruits and vegetables in abundance, the livestock and domestic animals, and the community of people involved ("Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em") - these are impractical expectations. George and Lennie, who were to some extent inspired by questions growing out of the story in chapter 4 of Genesis, want to retreat to chapter 2 and live in the Garden of Eden ! Of all ambitions in a fallen world, this is possibly the most unattainable ; for paradise is lost, as the name of Steinbeck's hero, George Milton, suggests. And though there will always be men like Candy, who represents sweet hope, the view of Crooks, who represents black despair, is probably a more accurate appraisal of the human condition : "Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in the head. They're all the time talkin' about it, but it's just in their head." Obviously in this context Crooks's comment about nobody ever getting land refers not to literal ownership but to the dream of contentment entertained by the simple workmen who come and go on the ranch.

To pursue the Milton parallel a step further, we perceive immediately that Steinbeck has no intention of justifying the ways of God to man. On the contrary, if anything, *Of Mice and Men* implies a critique of Hebrew-Christian morality, particularly in the area of the concept of punishment for sin. This opens up still another dimension of meaning in our interpretation of Steinbeck's novella. If George and Lennie fail to attain their dream farm (for reasons already explored), and the dream farm is a metaphor or image

for heaven (as suggested by Crooks's speech in scene 4) then the failure to achieve the dream farm is most likely associated with the question of man's failure to attain heaven. Steinbeck's consideration of this last-named theme is not hard to find. Along this particular line of thought, Lennie represents one essential aspect of man-the animal appetites, the craving to touch and feel, the impulse toward immediate gratification of sensual desires. George is the element of Reason which tries to control the appetites or, better still, to elevate them to a higher and more sublime level. As Lennie's hallucinatory rabbit advises him near the conclusion : "Christ knows George done ever'thing he could to jack you outa the sewer, but it don't do no good." Steinbeck suggests throughout that the appetites are incapable of satisfying Reason's demands, even though they coexist to compose the nature of man. (Me an' him travels together.") This submerged thesis is suggested when Aunt Clara-like the big rabbit, a product of Lennie's disturbed imagination-scolds Lennie in scene 6 :

> "I tol' you an' tol' you. I tol' you. 'Min' George because he's such a nice fella an' good to you.' But you don't never take no care. You do bad things."
>
> And Lennie answered her, "I tried, Aunt Clara, ma'am. I tried and tried. I couldn' help it."

The animal appetites, even though well attended and well intentioned, cannot be completely surpressed or controlled. Thus, the best man can hope for is a kind of insecure balance of power between these two elements - which is, in fact, what most of the ranch hands accomplish, indulging their craving for sensual pleasure in a legal and commonplace manner each payday. Failing this, man must surpress absolutely the appetites which refuse to be controlled, as George does in the symbolic killing of Lennie at the conclusion of the novella. Possibly this is a veiled reference to the drastic mutilation of man's nature required by the Hebrew-Christian ethic. At the same time the theological implications of *Of Mice and Men* project the very highest regard for the noble experiment in fraternal living practiced by George and Lennie ; and possibly the time scheme of their stay on the ranch - from Friday to Sunday - is a veiled reference to the sacrifice of Christ. He too tried to reverse the irreversible tide of Cain's curse by serving as the ultimate example of human brotherhood.

At this point I would like to briefly try to answer some specific objections which have been raised by critics of *Of Mice and Men*. The faults most often cited are the pessimism of Steinbeck's conclusion, which seems to some readers excessive ; and the author's attempt to impose a tragic tone upon a story which lacks characters of tragic stature. Both of these censures might be accepted as valid, or at least understood as reasonable, if we read the novella *on the surface level of action and character development*. But a reading which takes into account the mythical-allegorical significance of these actions

and characters not only nullifies the objections but opens up new areas of awareness. For example, although Lennie and George are humble people without the status of traditional tragic characters, their dream is very much like the dream of Plato for an ideal Republic. And their experiment in fellowship is not at all different from the experiment attempted by King Arthur. And at the same time it is reminiscent of at least one aspect of Christ' s ministry. These are remote parallels to *Of Mice and Men*, yet they are legitimate and lend some measure of substance, nobility, and human significance to Steinbeck's novella. Its pessimism is not superimposed upon a slight story, as charged, but has been there from the opening line, if we knew how to read it. Furthermore, the pessimism is not inspired by commercialism or false theatrics but by the Hebrew Testament. ("And Cain said unto the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'")

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with a brief summary of the main points discussed in this paper. *Of Mice and Men* is a realistic story with lifelike characters and a regional setting, presented in a style highly reminiscent of stage drama. Steinbeck's technique also includes verbal ambiguity in place names and character names, double entendre in certain key passages of dialogue, and a mythical-allegorical drift that invites the reader into areas of philosophical and theological inquiry. Sources for the novella are obviously Steinbeck's own experience as a laborer in California ; but on the allegorical level, *Of Mice and Men* reflects the early chapters of the Book of Genesis and the questions that grow out of the incidents therein are depicted. These consist primarily of the consideration of man as a creature alone or as a brother and companion to others. In addition, Steinbeck's story suggests the futility of the all-too-human attempt to recapture Eden, as well as a symbolic schema which defines human psychology. Steinbeck also implies a critique of the Hebrew-Christian ethic, to the effect that the absolute suppression of the animal appetites misrepresents the reality of the human experience.

Finally, we should say that Steinbeck's emphasis, on both the allegorical and realistic levels, is on the nobility of his characters' attempt to live fraternally. Even though the experiment is doomed to failure, Steinbeck's characters, like the best men of every age, dedicate themselves to pursuing the elusive grail of fellowship.

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