Social Realism and Naturalism in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Of *Mice and Men* is one of Steinbeck's most widely read, most researched, and most beloved works. Strangely enough, this children's story that was once prohibited in America is now among the top ten most often banned novels. John Steinbeck had modest expectations for *Of Mice and Men* when he began writing it at the beginning of 1936 and even during the interim between finishing it and publishing it. Steinbeck's tendency to have second thoughts about his work after it was completed was always there. In addition, Steinbeck was uncertain about the reception that his experimentation of form in *Of Mice and Men* would receive from readers. The author was therefore taken aback by the book's favorable reaction when he has put such little stock in his product Shortly after sending off the manuscript for *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck wrote to his agents, "I'm sorry that you do not find the new book as large in subject as it should be. I probably did not make my subjects and symbols clear. The microcosm is difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over." Though the agents were initially disappointed, *Of Mice and Men* went on to become a huge hit as a play, novel, and movie. It is unlikely that Steinbeck's "subjects and symbols clear" were understood by his audience, but it is evident that critics did not.

Steinbeck was familiar with the setting he selected for *Of Mice and Men*. The ranch owned by Steinbeck's maternal grandfather, Samuel Hamilton, in King City, California, is recreated in the book. Steinbeck visited this location when he was younger and would later return there for his stories in *The Long Valley* and *East of Eden*. In greater detail, the ranch that George and Lennie go to work on is fashioned after the Spreckles Sugar Company ranches in the California Salinas Valley, where Steinbeck worked during his stints at Stanford University. Drawing from his own experiences as a worker, stable hands, and traveling bindlestiff, Steinbeck describes the task and the workers.

For the most part, those critics who saw nothing beyond the obvious plot disliked the work immensely. Those who suspected more important levels of meaning were unable to offer specific and thorough explication. Today, almost twenty years later, it is generally accepted that the success of *Of Mice and Men* was an accident of history: Steinbeck merely cashed in on his audience's readiness to shed a tear, even a critical tear, over the plight of lonely migrant laborers. As one critic put it ten years later, "This is a negligible novel, seemingly written with a determined eye on the cash register" [George D. Snell, in his *The Shapers of American Fiction*, 1947].

John Steinbeck's work is most often considered in the literary tradition of Social Realism, a type of literature which concerns itself with the direct engagement with and intervention in the problematic (usually economic) social conditions in society. The height of Social Realism—and of its close relative, Naturalism, which blends social critique with a tragic narrative structure wherein a sort of natural fate irresistibly propels the characters toward their downfall—dates from the end of the nineteenth century and is represented by such authors as George Gissing, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norns.

This literary movement was beginning to fade by the 1930s; it had lost ground to what became known as Modernism, which, while still engaged in social and political thought, was far more experimental in its application and manipulation of literary and artistic devices. Some notable Modernist writers from Ireland, England, and the United States are James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound. The urgency of the social problems of the Great Depression and Steinbeck's need to record an immediate and direct critical protest may have contributed to his

decision to forgo highly radical experimentation and embrace an immediate and direct critical protest of the 1930s.

Of Mice and Men, like Steinbeck's two other major works from the 1930s, *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, takes its subject and protagonists from the agricultural working class of California during the Great Depression. George and Lennie are itinerant laborers who roam the state looking for any sort of temporary work on large commercial ranches and farms. They work in these places as long as there is a specific task to be done—in *Of Mice and Men*, for example, George and Lennie are hired to bag the barley harvest on a farm near the city of Soledad—and when they are finished, they collect their wages and move on in search of another ranch and another temporary job. In these two interrelated aspects of life in California's agricultural working class—the nomadic root-lessness of the itinerant laborer and the wage system wherein the workers are paid cash for specific tasks but are not consistently involved in the process of agricultural production from beginning to end—Steinbeck sees a problematic relation between the workers and the land that they work.

For *Of Mice and Men*, this issue serves as the primary thematic focus. It's true that the novella is about dreaming of the future, and discussions about it frequently start with this theme. However, the central dream in Of Mice and Men is not just about dreaming in general; rather, it is directly tied to Steinbeck's critical interpretation of a particular facet of society in his modern-day California. This problem provides the central thematic concern for *Of Mice and Men*. To be sure, it is a story about dreaming of the future, and this is often the thematic thread which first gets picked up in discussions of the novella. But *Of Mice and Men* is not simply about dreaming in general, for the nature of the dream at the center of this story is specifically related to Steinbeck's critical understanding of a specific aspect of society in his contemporary California.; that is to say, George and Lennie's dream is specifically necessitated by and responds directly to the limitations placed on their lives, and their story is meant to illuminate the social conditions which Steinbeck seeks to critique. As in all Social Realist literature, this direct engagement with the actual world in all its specificity must be rigorously considered in any thorough reading.

When the reader meets George and Lennie, their nomadic existence is one of the first things Steinbeck establishes. They have just come from the town of Weed, where they have been temporarily employed but where Lennie has gotten into trouble scaring a young girl. They have escaped from the angry townspeople and now George is going to try to secure a new job for them on a farm near Soledad, hundreds of miles to the south. Further details here accentuate the hard travelling, the ceaseless moving that the two constantly have to undertake. For example, as they pause by the river in the opening pages George mentions that the bus they were on had left them ten miles short of their destination, forcing them to walk the rest of the way to the farm where they are not even sure they will find work. When they do arrive and are about to be taken on, George is given the bunk of a man who, as Candy indifferently says, had "just quit, the way a guy will. . . . Just wanted to move. Didn't give no other reason but the food. Just [said] 'gimme my time' one night, the way any guy would." Walking for miles, finding a bit of work, sleeping in a bunk house and disappearing one day, these are the exemplary images of the itinerant worker's life, the details with which Steinbeck strategically develops a precise setting and milieu for George and Lennie's story.

Against the exposition of the itinerant laborer's lonely life of moving and working, Steinbeck counterposes the dream that George and Lennie share. As mentioned above, it is not just any dream, or even simply the dream of a better life. In the opening chapter, when George repeats (as he often does) the story for Lennie he begins not by talking about their own individual plans but rather about the state of many men like them. He says: "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on to some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to." This is the kind of life that George and Lennie dream of leaving, and, as George suggests, the hardships of that life have primarily

to do with solitude and with not having a stable place or enough money to maintain oneself. But George and Lennie have other plans for themselves. A few moments later:

Lennie broke in "*But not us! An' why? Because . . . because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why* " He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!"

"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 lan'*," Lennie shouted.

George then goes on to describe their modest farm, the security and freedom of having their own piece of land, and the way they will be able to work for themselves instead of for an occasional wage. A reading of these particular desires and ambitions which George and Lennie cling to, and of the particular things they want to overcome, suggests that Steinbeck rather than writing a story about "dreaming" or "hoping" in general is instead making a very precise and pointed critique of certain aspects of what it is like for many people to live in California, and, by extension, American society. More specifically, *Of Mice and Men* is a critique of the plight of a certain stratum of that society—the landless, poor, agricultural workers—and in the figures of George and Lennie, Steinbeck tries to dramatize on an individual level the tragic story of an entire class of people.

It is worth noting that in the story George and Lennie's dream is by no means unique to them, for it proves also to be the dream of every ranch hand to whom they tell it; Candy and Crooks, for example, each ask if they can join in on the plan. Candy, of course, is accepted, while Crooks seems to have second thoughts (Steinbeck also devotes a large part of one chapter to the figure of Crooks, and to a critical exposition of racism in rural California). The characters in *Of Mice and Men* then can be seen as archetypal insofar as their story is meant to be understood as emblematic of a larger, nonfictional story. They represent the people who work on the farms and in the factories but do not own any part of them, people who earn a wage and have little or nothing more. And in constructing the novella this way Steinbeck wants to draw the readers attention to what he sees as certain urgent and widespread social problems. This sort of direct engagement with social concerns is typical of fiction within the Social Realist tradition.

The theme of friendship is also there in *Of Mice and Men*. This is presented by Steinbeck in a way that is both emotive and scientific. Steinbeck thoroughly develops his phalanx concept, the idea of group man, and the transformations that take place when people join groups to achieve a shared objective—specifically, the shift from "I" to "we" thinking—in later works. Steinbeck's personal acquaintance with Ed Ricketts also influenced his notions about phalanxes. The concept is briefly presented in *Of Mice and Men* with the formation of the phalanx, which is made up of George and Lennie, and the subsequent growth of the phalanx once Candy and Crooks are accepted into the group.

Even the story's dramatic climax needs to be viewed through a societal lens. Curley's wife is the driving force behind Lennie's terrible demise, and for the most part of the narrative, she is portrayed as a wholly frightening character—a portent, if you will. But when she tells Lennie about her past, the reader understands that she too has to be understood in the context of her environment. Her existence is initially imprisoned by the oppressive nature of her mother and the small-town claustrophobia of Salinas (Steinbeck's own hometown), and then by her unfortunate marriage to Curley, whom, she tells Lennie, she does not even like. Her role is more real and intricate: the events that follow her acts are also the unfavorable outcome of the particular customs and norms that control society and modern life (in her instance, the normative models of family and marriage). Thus, the conclusion of

the novella underlines and develops Steinbeck's examination of the negative impact that social norms and practices can have on the lives of those who live in that society.

Popular literature is what Steinbeck writes. When arguing for the literary value of Steinbeck's works, empathetic critics highlight, among other reasons, his inventive use of method and structure in his stories as well as its multi-layered symbolism. These standards, together with the timeless and universal topics that speak to the average reader, guarantee that Steinbeck will be read, studied, and influence the readers—those whose needs literature exists to fulfill.

One can discern Steinbeck's homage to and heritage from Social Realist and Naturalist fiction by examining his consistent placement of his characters and story inside highly precise and, more significantly, factual social contexts. The story of *Of Mice and Men*, from the optimistic aspirations of George and Lennie to the tragic conclusion of those aspirations, is based on a thorough examination and criticism of the all-encompassing social organization systems and how they impact the individuals compelled to live within them.

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