

The Impossibility of the American Dream in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract:

In the novel "Of Mice and Men", John Steinbeck resonates with the people's endurance when subjected to social injustice. The characters, George and Lennie, are closely delineated by analogy to animals, as being either weak or powerful. They are being entrapped like rodents, yet they are potentially strong as a socio-'professional' group. More than in Steinbeck's other books, in this one the individual tragedy is manifest.

Keywords: social injustice, rodents, individual tragedy.

As generally acknowledged, John Steinbeck's books are reflections of the Great Depression; the 1930's were hard times when people were treated unfairly because of their race, gender or social class². *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are among the most important novels that captured the reality of this most difficult period. It was the age when the American Dream became a nightmare. It was no longer the long desired dream for freedom that included the promise of the possibility of prosperity and success as James Truslow Adams defined it in *The Epic of America*, which he wrote in 1931: The American dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.

Benjamin Franklin was one of the first who used the theme of the American Dream in his *Autobiography*. Then it was dealt with by important American writers: Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, as well as by ethnic writers, as for example, by the Asian Americans ones.

The United States of America were no longer associated with the notion of freedom. In his earlier novel, *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck writes about a possible cause of the characters' failure of dreams: "It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can't remember, into a future he cannot foresee, nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy, except one. He cannot win over himself." (apud Watt, 1978: 57)

Even before they get to their new job on the ranch, they wish to make enough money to live independently and have no boss anymore. They believe that the new job will last long enough to accomplish their dream. But the reader knows from the beginning it will not come true because Lennie is a physical giant with the small brain capacity who is always causing trouble around him. He is presented as having the personality of a child fascinated with rabbits; he is obsessed with petting mice, rabbits, puppies, or touching girls' soft dresses. At the beginning of the novel *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie keeps a mouse in his pocket whom he continues stroking even after he had accidentally killed him. Later he is given a puppy to take care of, but he cannot control his strength and a new similar accident happens.

George and Lennie are the symbols of the poor ranch hands who wish to work for anyone but themselves. Their perfect world is one of independence. They cannot control their lives, as they have to do what the landowner tells them. And probably one of the most important issues of the ranch workers during this time as reflected in each and every character in *Of Mice and Men* is solitude: " 'Guys like us, that work on

ranches,' George told Lennie, 'are the loneliest guys in the world.'" (Steinbeck, 1993: 13-14) Even the town where the action takes place is called Soledad, "[...] an abbreviation for Our Lady of Loneliness (*as Los Angeles is short for Our Lady of the Angels*) [...]" (Lisca, 1978: 86) However, George and Lennie are lucky as they travel together.

I see 'em'" (Steinbeck, 1993:11). Whenever George and Lennie's dream is recounted, Lennie's tending the rabbits is always highlighted. Every time he speaks to somebody, he keeps on turning to his rabbits he wants so much to pet. Even when he is in the barn with Curley's wife who tells him about her dreams, he makes the same point: "Curley's wife said angrily: 'Don't you think of nothing but rabbits?' 'We gonna have a little place' Lennie explained patiently.

The topos of the little furry animals appear in a rhythmic pattern throughout the novel, from the beginning to the end. At the beginning of the book, the author introduces the rabbits that make the scenery look like a place from Eden¹. They happily "come out of the bush to sit on the sand"; then, disturbed by George and Lennie, they "hurry noiselessly for cover." (Steinbeck, 1993:1) Using this image, Steinbeck foreshadows that something fearful will happen and all their dreams will ruin in the end.

George continues describing the farm in terms of things he loved when he was a child, which offers the reader a hint that this dream will not come true in the end as childhood is a period in every person's life that passes and never comes back: "I could build a smoke house like the one grandpa' had..." At first, only George and Lennie shared the dream farm. It is a powerful dream however, and it becomes irresistible for Candy and even for the sceptical Crooks. It is not the absence of work or having a lot of money that they yearn after, but having some place to belong to, as they have no home, no family. Candy becomes interested in their plan. Much older, hunchbacked and having only one hand, Candy is a swamper and fears that his age is making him useless.

Because of his race, he is treated like an outcast. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." (Steinbeck, 1993: 81) She reminds him of his place in society because of his skin colour and makes Crooks lose his self-esteem.

In the novel, Steinbeck does not present Lennie like a monster; because without intention he acts destructively in moments of fear without intention, he becomes a sympathetic figure. Any reader would regard him not only with despair but also with affection as his only companion and friend, George. The only sight of a rabbit that Lennie can have is a hallucination after the death of Curley's wife. The dream takes the form of an illusion at the end of the novel when Lennie first has the vision of his aunt Clara who scolds him. His killing of Curley's wife awakens George to the impossibility of their dreamed of farm. He has to admit that the bitter Crooks is right: such paradises of freedom, contentment, and safety are not to be found in this world. Just like the reader, George knows that their dream will not get accomplished in the end. Lennie's actions just as the actions of a mouse are predictable.

After killing mice and a puppy with his tenderness and uncontrolled power, George knows that he will not stop killing. He understands Lennie only too well, and wants him to die with the image of their dream farm in front of his eyes. The final scene shows Lennie calling George who tells him the story of the farm they are going to have one day, just like a father who tells a bedtime story to his son. But this time it is told for the very last time. Thus, Lennie dies with the hope that their dream will get accomplished soon. But George is not permitted such comfort. He has to live with the guilt of having killed his friend and has to go on living with the failure of their dream. Although he should have felt free from a burden like Lennie, he feels now even more miserable as there is no other dream to strive for.

In this novel, dreams are ways in which the characters try to defeat the hopelessness of their existence, as John Steinbeck himself stated: "Everyone in the world has a dream he knows can't come off, but spends his life hoping it may."

In Steinbeck's novel³, poverty draws the human and the natural worlds closer

together. Poverty has reduced the characters in *Of Mice and Men* to animals. the author's characters are more animal-like than human, as Edmund Wilson wrote in an essay in 1940. The two men, especially Lennie, are described in animal similes: Lennie drags his feet "the way a bear drags his paws" and drinks from the pool "like a horse." (Steinbeck, 1993: 9) He even dreams about living in a cave like a bear. Human actions are foreshadowed by the actions of animals.

Lennie embodies the double image of animal and of man as Steinbeck outlines man's condition in the novel *In Dubious Battle*: "I believe that man is a double thing, a group animal and, at the same time an individual. In creating the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck clearly draws on the biological concept - the environmental fitness. They seem to be unfit for the community where they live because of their race, physical or intellectual abilities, their social status; these are also reasons why they are isolated.

Slim, the wise skinner, said to himself: "Ain't many guys travel 'round together. I don't know why. Maybe Rabbits also epitomize the universe of the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck foregrounds the rabbits many times so as to reveal Lennie's unfulfilled dream, as they are all he hopes. They offer the simple 'access' to the soft fur that he likes so much to touch. Rabbits are a source of comfort for Lennie. Some readers may wonder why John Steinbeck emphasized rabbits so much in the novel *Of Mice and Men*. Critics found an answer: rabbits played a major role during the Great Depression in the American society and especially in California. Even the U.S. Government encouraged the raising of rabbits for meat. In the 1940's the sales of rabbit meat were above those of poultry sales. But as America started to become prosperous, rabbits were no longer bought for their meat but as house pets.

The conclusion to this work is probably best revealed in Paul McCarthy's words: In the last analysis, George and Lennie symbolize something of the enduring and hopeful as well as the meaningless. They manage – if only for a brief time – to rise above circumstances and to convince others as well as themselves that dreams are part of the territory, that all they have to do is keep working and hoping and some day they

will have their own place. If they only somehow control their weaknesses and keep a little ahead of circumstances, but they cannot. (McCarthy, 1980: 102)

George and Lennie struggle against the injustice of the world and at the same time against their own weak features that are part not only of the human nature, but also of the 'animal' world. Despite his physical size and strength, Lennie is powerless in front of the universal laws just like the little rodents.

The novel *Of Mice and Men* is not just a book about a particular time and space. It is timeless because it includes elements that are part of every human being's existence: suffering determined by isolation and solitude, friendship, sacrifice; the most important message of the book is probably the futility of one's holding onto dreams. Because of some stark observations, the novel may seem pessimistic. Still, the writer suggests that dreams keep people going on when they normally would have given up. Dreams are part of the human nature; even in an abnormal society people can dream; nobody can take this right away from them.

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