

# American Reverie in John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men"

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the deep rooted cultural imbalance of American individuals that always reveals a mythological unbounded anecdote in their long journey of deceived life style. Here, 'American dreaming' is noted by a cultural imbalance, to which Steinbeck emphasizes the dreams throughout the novel. George aspires to independence, to be his own boss, to have a homestead, and most importantly to be "somebody". Lennie aspires to be with George on his independent homestead, and to quench his fixation on soft objects. Candy aspires to reassert his responsibility lost with the death of his dog, and for security for his old age — on George's homestead. Crooks aspires to a small homestead where he can express self-respect, security, and most of all, acceptance. Curley's wife dreams to be an actress, to satisfy her desire for fame lost when she married Curley, and an end to her loneliness. Thus the American dream leads entire verve and the characters too towards an infinite longingness.

**Keywords:** American Dreaming, Cultural Imbalance, Mice and Men.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck unveils the difficulties faced by the working class and how they overcame the countless obstacles laid before them during troubled times such as the Great Depression. *Of Mice and Men* is a touching tale of the friendship between two men- set against the backdrop of United States during the depression of 1930's. It depicts the real hopes and dreams of working class America.

The literary power of this novel is about the two central characters friendship and their shared dream. They are very different stay together, support each other in a world full of people who are destitute and alone. Their brotherhood and fellowship is an achievement of enormous humanity. The theme is the impossibility of "American Dream". The American Dream is a dream that a person could one day be free and work for themselves, and live somewhere they wanted to. People also wanted to try out of poverty during the Great Depression.

The term was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* which was written in 1931. He states: "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. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are capable of, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the circumstances of birth or position."

Their perfect world is one of independence. Workers like Lennie and George have no family, no home, and very little control over their lives. They have to do what the boss tells them and they have little to show for it. They only own what they can carry. Therefore, this idea of having such power over their lives is a strong motivation.

George and Lennie have a dream, even before they arrive at their new job on the ranch, to make enough money to live "off the fat of the land" and be their own bosses. Lennie will be permitted, then, to tend the rabbits. Candy, upon hearing about the dream, wanted to join them so that he would not be left alone. Crooks, the Negro outcast, wanted to join them so that he wouldn't be alone. When Whit brings in the pulp magazine with the letter written by Bill Tenner, the men are all

very impressed. They are not certain that Bill wrote the letter, but Whit is convinced he did, and tries to convince the others. In the transient life of these workers, it is rare to leave any kind of permanent mark on the world. In this letter Bill Tenner has achieved some of the immortality the other men cannot imagine for themselves. When George goes into a full description of the dream farm, its Eden-like qualities become even more apparent. All the food they want will be right there, with minimal effort. As Lennie says: "We could live offa the fatta the lan'." Chapter 3, pg. 57. When George talks about their farm, he twice describes it in terms of things he loved in childhood: "I could build a smoke house like the one gran'pa had..." Chapter 3, pg. 57. George yearns for his future to reflect the beauty of his childhood. "An' we'd keep a few pigeons to go flyin' around the win'mill like they done when I was a kid." The ideal world presented by Crooks also reflects childhood. His father had a chicken ranch full of white chickens, a berry patch, and alfalfa. He and his brothers would sit and watch the chickens. Companionship and plentiful food are both parts of Crooks' dream.

Curley's wife has a dream that although different in detail from the other's dreams, is still very similar in its general desires. She wants companionship so much that she will try to talk to people who don't want to talk to her, like all the men on the ranch. Unsatisfied by her surly husband, she constantly lurks around the barn, trying to engage the workers in conversation. The second part of her dream parallels the men's desire for their own land. She wanted to be an actress in Hollywood. She imagines how great it would be to stay in nice hotels, own lots of beautiful clothes, and have people want to take her photograph. Both attention and financial security would have been hers. Like the men she desires friendship, and also material comforts, though the specifics of her dream differ from theirs. When George tells Lennie to look across the river and imagine their farm, he lets Lennie die with the hope that they will attain their dream, and attain it soon. George, who must kill Lennie, is not allowed such comfort. He must go on living knowing the failure of their dream, as well as deal with the guilt of having killed his best friend

George and Lennie's dream of owning a farm, which would enable them to sustain themselves, and, most important, offer them protection from an inhospitable world, represents a prototypically American ideal. Their journey, which awakens George to the impossibility of this dream, sadly proves that the bitter Crook's is right: such paradises of freedom, contentment, and safety are not to be found in *this* world.

Before the action of the story begins, circumstances have robbed most of the characters of these wishes. Curley's wife for instance, has resigned herself for an unfulfilling marriage. What makes all of these dreams typically untarnished happiness, for the freedom to follow their desires. George and Lennie's dream of owning a farm, which would enable them to sustain themselves and most important, offer them protection from an inhospitable world, represents a prototypically American ideal. Their Journey, which awakens George to the impossibility of this dream, sadly proves that the bitter Crooks is right. Such paradises of freedom, contentment and safety are not to be found in this world.

George and Lennie may dream a little dream of possessing a farm, but they don't get very far with their to-do list before it all crumbles in heartbreaking failure. As Crooks points out, all ranch hands dream of owning their own farm; it's their version of the 2.5 kids and white picket fence. Unfortunately, white picket fences are in short supply during the Great Depression, and *Of Mice and Men* ends in the only way it can: with the utter collapse of everyone's dream—even Curley's. Dreams are one of the ways in which the characters combat the loneliness and hopelessness of their existence. The most obvious example is the dream farm, a dream shared at first only by George and Lennie, but which later spreads to include Candy and Crooks. Crooks reveal that it is the favourite dream of the itinerant ranch hands: 'Seems like ever' guy got land in his head. 'It is a powerful dream, however, and even the cynical Crooks falls under its spell for a short time. To Lennie, the dream is an antidote to disappointment and loneliness, and he often asks George to recite the description of the farm to him. Curley's wife is another who has dreams, her fantasies of a part in the movies and a life of luxury. Part of her dissatisfaction with her life is that it can never measure up to her dreams. Significantly, none of the characters ever achieve their dreams.

*Of mice and Men* portrays the nature of human existence. A profound sense of loneliness and isolation was found in the major characters like George, Lennie, Candy and Crooks. Each desires the comfort of a friend, but will settle for the attentive ear of the stranger.

Curley's wife admits to Candy, Crooks and Lennie that she is unhappily married and Crooks tells life is no good without a companion to turn to in times of confusion and needs. The characters are rendered helpless by their isolation, and yet, even at their weakest and seek to destroy those who are even weaker than they. Perhaps the most powerful example of the cruel tendency is when Crooks criticizes Lennie's dream on farm and his dependence on George. Having just admitted his

vulnerabilities, he is a black man with a crooked back who longs for companionship. Steinbeck records a profound human truth; oppression does not come only from the Hands of the strong or the powerful. The novel suggests that the most visible kind of strength that used to oppress others – is itself born of weakness. The term “Loneliness” in this novel refers to the intellectual identity of each individual. The national exploration of the country is acclaimed by every individual lies searching for their own identity. It is very clear that hallucination often grilles with full fledged mark on its own way, but without knowing themselves. Loneliness is engendered by homelessness in this novel.

Loneliness affects many of the characters, and Steinbeck seems to show that it is a natural and inevitable result of the kind of life they are forced to lead. The itinerant workers are caught in a trap of loneliness - they never stay in one place long enough to form permanent relationships. Even if such relationships existed, they would probably be destroyed by the demands of the itinerant life. Let's examine the lonely situation of some of the characters, see how they try to deal with it, and the result. Candy is lonely because he is old, and is different from the other hands. His only comfort is his old dog, which keeps him company and reminds him of days when he was young and whole. He has no relatives, and once his dog is killed is totally alone. He eagerly clutches at the idea of buying a farm with George and Lennie, but of course this all comes to nothing.

Candy's disappointment is expressed in the bitter words he utters to the body of Curley's wife, whom he blames for spoiling his dream. George is also caught in the trap of loneliness. Just as Candy has his dog for company, George has Lennie (who is often described in animal-like terms). Continuing the parallel, George too is left completely alone when Lennie is killed. Another lonely character is Curley's wife. Newly married and in a strange place, she is forbidden by Curley to talk to anyone but him. To counter this, she constantly approaches the ranch hands on the excuse of looking for Curley. The only result is that the men regard her as a slut, and Curley becomes even more intensely jealous. Finally, her loneliness leads to her death as she makes the ' serious error of trying to overcome it by playing the tease with Lennie. Curley himself is lonely. His new wife hates him as do all the ranch hands who despise him for his cowardice. He has married in an attempt to overcome his loneliness, but has blindly chosen a wife totally inappropriate for the kind of life he leads. His feelings are all channelled into aggressive behaviour which further isolates his wife and leads to the incident with Lennie where his hand is crushed. Crooks is another who is isolated because he is different. He copes with it by keeping a distance between himself and the other hands. When he does allow himself to be drawn into the dream of working on George and Lennie's dream farm, he is immediately shut out by George's anger.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Of Mice and Men is an extremely despondent novel. The novel shows the dreams of a small group of people and then contrasts these dreams with a reality that is unreachable, which they cannot achieve. Even though the dream never becomes reality, Steinbeck gives an optimistic message. George and Lennie do not achieve their dream, but friendship stands out as a shining example of how people can live and love even in a world of alienation and disconnectedness.

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