

ELEMENTS OF EXISTENTIALISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S 'OF MICE AND MEN'

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck's play "Of Mice and Men" is riddled with existential themes. The play, set during the Great Depression, follows the lives of two migrant workers, George and Lennie, as they navigate the harsh realities of their existence. Through the characters' experiences, actions and interactions, Steinbeck delves into the fundamental elements of existentialism, such as the inherent meaninglessness of life, the absurdity of human existence, and the struggle for individual freedom and authenticity.

Keywords: Existentialism, Freedom, Absurdity and alianation

Introduction:

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that focuses on the existence of the individual and the choices they make in their life. It delves into the idea that individuals are responsible for their own actions and create their own meaning in life. Existentialism is often associated with thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, who emphasized the importance of freedom, authenticity and responsibility. Existentialists believe that individuals have the freedom to make choices and take control of their own lives. Sartre stated that "existence precedes essence," means that individuals are not born with a predefined purpose or essence, but rather create their own essence through their actions and choices. This emphasis on freedom highlights the idea that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own lives and must take ownership of their decisions. Sartre said, "man is condemned to be free," meaning that individuals must embrace their freedom and live in accordance with their own values, rather than relying on external authorities or values. In addition to freedom and authenticity, existentialism also emphasizes the concept of responsibility. Existentialists believe that individuals are responsible for their actions and must accept the consequences of their choices. This idea of personal responsibility is closely tied to the concept of freedom, as individuals must take ownership of their decisions and not blame external circumstances or forces for their actions. As Nietzsche stated, "He who cannot command himself must obey. The novella 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck is full of Existential themes and this paper

attempts to analyze how these elements are explained through the characters and their actions.

Discussion

John Steinbeck was raised in Salinas, California, which eventually served as the backdrop for many of his works of fiction, including the novella 'Of Mice and Men'. He worked as a hired worker on nearby ranches during his teenage years, when he was greatly influenced by the rural Californians and their way of life. He wrote 'Of Mice and Men' in 1937 during the American Great Depression. It depicts the terrible social and economic fallout from the 1929 catastrophe as seen through the eyes of common, impoverished Americans who had nothing but darkness and hopelessness ahead of them. It is the story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two displaced migrant ranch labourers who travel around California in quest of new employment possibilities.

One of the central tenets of existentialism is the idea that life is ultimately meaningless and devoid of inherent purpose. This belief is reflected in the characters of George and Lennie, who struggle to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives as migrant workers. George, in particular, grapples with the futility of their existence, lamenting the repetitiveness of their nomadic lifestyle and the constant struggle for survival. In a moment of despair, George reflects on the emptiness of their lives, stating,

"Guys like us that work on ranches are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. [...] With us, it aren't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us" (Steinbeck, 15).

This passage highlights the characters' awareness of the meaningless nature of their existence, as they seek companionship and connection in a world that is indifferent and harsh.

Furthermore, Steinbeck explores the absurdity of human existence through the characters' interactions and experiences. The play is filled with instances of seemingly random and irrational events, such as Lennie accidentally killing Curley's wife or the tragic outcome of their dream of owning a farm. These events underscore the chaotic and unpredictable nature of life, as well as the characters' inability to control their own destinies. Despite their best efforts to carve out a better life for themselves, George and Lennie are ultimately at the mercy of external forces and circumstances beyond their control. This sense of absurdity is encapsulated in George's realization that their dream of owning a farm is nothing more than a futile fantasy, as he laments, "I think I know from the very first. I think I know we'd never do her" (Steinbeck, 105).

Loneliness and the need to fit in were the novel's central recurring themes. As the story goes on, numerous characters frequently discuss how they lonely and are in search for their life's meaning. It is evident that the author wrote the novel with the intention of expressing the universal emotions of loneliness and the characters searching for a sense of purpose and companionship on their journey through life during The Great Depression of the 1930s.

George feels overburdened by his role sometimes as he is the only one who takes care of Lennie. He feels alone because he was unable to talk to anyone about his problems. He tells Slim,

"I ain't got no people. I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time, they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time."

Lennie's mental illness prevented him from participating. He was not included in any conversations. He wants companionship, he feels it but he is not able to express it. This is evident when he tells George

"I don't want no trouble. I jus' want to tend the rabbits. An' live off the fatta the lan'."

Crooks and Curley's wife also felt isolation and the desire to belong to something, due to their social standing, that was out of reach for them. Crooks, a "negro,"

Moreover, the play delves into the existential struggle for individual freedom and authenticity, as the characters grapple with the constraints of society and the expectations placed upon them. George and Lennie, in particular, are constantly battling against the stifling conformity and oppression of the world around them, as they strive to assert their own identities and forge their own paths. This quest for autonomy and self-determination is encapsulated in George's decision to put an end to Lennie's life, as a means of sparing him from a crueler fate at the hands of Curley and the other ranch hands. In this moment, George confronts the harsh reality of their existence and makes a choice that is both tragic and liberating, as he seeks to assert his agency and take control of his own destiny

Conclusion

Steinbeck's play "Of Mice and Men" is brimming with existential themes and philosophy, as the characters grapple with the inherent meaninglessness of life, the absurdity of human existence, and the struggle for individual freedom and authenticity. Through the characters' experiences and interactions, Steinbeck delves into the fundamental elements of existentialism, shedding light on the complexities and contradictions of the human condition. The play serves as a poignant reminder of the existential dilemmas that confront us all, as we navigate the uncertainties and challenges of our own lives, the burden of choices we make.

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