

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF: “OF MICE AND MEN”,
A 'PLAYABLE NOVEL' BY JOHN STIENBECK**

Devarshi Modi

Assistant Professor at IITE Gandhinagar

Article Received: 16/01/2024

Article Accepted: 13/02/2024

Published Online: 16/02/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.2.75

Abstract:

“Of Mice and Men” by Steinbeck is a phenomenal work that is a playable novella. The short novel narrates the story of the workers of a Ranch, George and Lennie and their dream of having their own piece of farm. They are joined in their dreams by Crooks and Candy, with the dream being a hope that is different for each of them. The following study looks into the development of this novel through the themes and the characters that have also seemed to be imbibed into them, in a critical light.

Keywords: Steinbeck, George, Lennie, Crooks, Candy, Curley’s Wife, dreams, nature, fate, loneliness.

Introduction:

The novella “Of Mice and Men” written by John Steinbeck is regarded as a playable novel for its strong portrayal of narration of its characters particularly George Milton and Lennie Small. This novel presents the scope of delivering an image of humans and their place in the universe. This novel illustrates the position of humans being a minute fragment of a vast universe. This is realised through the novel that Steinbeck waves through several thematic presentations through the narrative and uniquely its characters. The following study looks into the development of Steinbeck’s novel “Of Mice and Men”, a parable set in the Great Depression that draws on multiple themes through its narrative. This novel looks into the journey of its characters to do so.

Aim of the Study

The present study presently has the aim of critically analysing the unique playable novel “Of Mice and Men” by Steinbeck. The study looks through the themes and characters that are significantly characteristic to the themes development.

Discussion

Nature of Dreams

The novel delves into the story of two men, George and Lennie and their dreams that they use for giving a sense of meaning to their lives. This novel, looking through the narrative of George and Lennie and the dream of owning a little farm, is a central element to the continuation of the story (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). This story can also be observed as a glimpse of the perception of the American dream. The novel treats the narration of George and Lennie's dream as a ritualistic development, the vision of owning the farm land being symbolic for the development of human dignity.

This can be seen through George wishing to accomplish independence. It also is visible from Lennie wanting security and sanctuary similar to the animals he pets, Candy security for long life and homeliness and for Crooks the farm signifies gaining self-respect and acceptance (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). The novel also speaks of the theme of dreams as the characters and their trailing after the American Dream and its prosperous image that the men, as people that undergone the Great Depression and moved to California for achieving their dreams, ultimately failing, particularly the minority in the society (Aristide, 2019). The portrayal of characters in the novel also looks into the situations that affect the journey of their dream. This can be observed through the portrayal of characters George and Lennie as the image of immigrants and mentally disabled, Crooks being the sole representation of the African American people (Aristide, 2019). As well as Candy as the image of old people with the discrimination that they face at the hands of white race presented by Curley's wife and Curley in the novel.

The novel, through the characterisation of the segregating class of people through the characters of Curley and his wife, also illustrates the role and impact that the characters had on the dreams and the struggles that marginalised people such as George, Lennie, Crooks and Candy had to undergo. The title of the novel also presents this through the probable analogy of a mouse wanting a warm safe winter facing the sharp cold, possibly inspired from the 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns (Alnajm, 2020). The characters in the novel look for their perfect dream life in the harsh times of the Great Depression in their own idealisation of new lives. This wish that these characters held, particularly the characters George and Lennie, was for a warm and secure place to call their own and have a peaceful life.

Essence of loneliness and isolation

The development of the novel also presents the thematic issue of loneliness and isolation that the characters undergo. The isolation of the novel's characters are presented through their continuous wish for continuing communication despite differences. The character desires to break free from loneliness, something that can be spotted through the example of the characters and their conversations in the novel reflecting their state of loneliness for instances through the isolation that George and Lennie initially face moving into the town (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). The dialogues of

characters such as Crooks and Slim illustrate the sense of loneliness driving the characters into isolation and a state of addictive developments. This can be seen in the case of the practice of the ranch workers going to town to cure their pressing loneliness, in the case of Lennie visiting Crooks and later on also Curley's wife. The dream of owning a farm that George and Lennie envision is also a symbolic representation of the wish for doing away with the culture of monotonous loneliness and surrounding themselves with soft farm animals such as rabbits.

The novel is filled with instances of the portrayal of the characters suffering in loneliness in their own lives. One instance of this loneliness can be seen through Crook in the novel, speaking through his words of the intrinsic loneliness and isolation that he undergoes on several levels (Hui, 2022). There is opposition between the people of black and the white races seen through Crooks, the differences among men and women observed through Curley's wife and the distancing among the animals and humans that can be viewed in the scene of George reprimanding Lennie for bringing in a puppy. The town also is a symbolic representation of the dominant theme of loneliness given its name being Soledad, its meaning being solitude (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). The imagery of loneliness can also be seen in reflection of the spatial distance that the characters have among each other and with other people existing in the ranch.

Barriers

Stienbeck had also vividly portrayed the issue of barriers that are relevant and present throughout the novel and the characters that face isolation. There are several parabolic presentations of the characters living behind the barriers and facing discriminative development that haunts them and their course of life. One such representation can be seen in the case of Curley's wife trying to make bonds of companionship with the workers of the ranch in hopes of moving away from his loneliness (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). The envious Curley made the workers recoil, and obstructed Curley's wife into isolation.

The issue of barriers and obstacles that people face in the narrative of the novel also present the threatening life that the characters exist in that depriving society. One of the significant barriers being the issue of racist society that Crooks is working under despite his qualifications, living in a stable among animals (Hui, 2022). The wish for overcoming these barriers and their impacts through the dream of a free and safe life is a fantasy that Crooks sees George and Lennie have and are joined in by Candy. Crooks initially bonds on this hopeful aspiration but later leaves with his experiences barring from exploring it and holding his wish for self-worth and acceptance in a discriminating society (Shaan, 2020). This shows the humiliation and inferiority that the black Americans face under the ruling of white race in American society.

There are also barriers that present the problems of older or disabled people being done away with due to their potential obsolescence. This can be seen through

Candy's inherent fear of being left out for old age and handicap and joins in with George and Lennie in their aspirations of owning a farm of their own after losing the dog (Ganiyeva and Rajabova, 2023). This goes on to portray the obstacles that disabled population driving the insecurities and isolation that threatens them of losing a secure life, with the connotation that the barrier of weakness holds them back. The imagery of loss and deaths can also be suggestive of the use of this theme for the development of the characters as people suffering loneliness wedged into their lives from the discrimination and loss that they undergo, such as Candy losing his dog, or George killing Lennie and facing his dream being shattered.

Powerlessness

The novel reflects on the issues of powerlessness through not only the situations and the scenes in the novel but also through the attributes of the characters that are in the narrative. The majority of the main characters including George, Lennie, Crooks, Candy along with Slim are workers in the ranch and can be seen as the underdog section of the society keeping their insecurities and problems. The characters in "Of Mice and Men" akin to in Steinbeck's other works, undergo the destiny of helplessness and strife, bound by the issues of societal, economic and intellectual helplessness (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). This can be seen in the presence of helplessness in these issues of powerlessness can be seen in Lennie and his dependency on George for guiding him in decision making given his mental handicap.

This can be seen in several instances with Lennie being strongly dependent on George and his incapacity for realising the consequences to his actions. This leads to making them lose their jobs and start finding newer ones, living wandering around and practically homeless. The novel portrays several points of powerlessness ranging economically, socially, racially and so on (Basu, D., 2020). Lennie's intellectual powerlessness leads to him depending on George and his guidance in order to let him make decisions for his own sake. George also is helplessly continuing to guide Lennie away from the dangers that he might come across, particularly the trying to keep him away from the threats that Curley and Curley's wife posed (Singh and Tyagi, 2021). Curley's wife also is relatively subjected to this powerlessness with her envious husband not providing her the much needed companionship and her dismantled goals of becoming a Hollywood star. Candy's insecurity as an ageing man is also a sign of the character facing the issue of societal vulnerability along with the societal insecurity and prejudice that Crooks faces as a black man.

The characters are helpless in their own manner and qualities. The characters face powerlessness as is embodied by themselves. George dreams of having his own place, having a settled and independent life, whereas Lennie wishes for a farm and pet soft animals such as rabbits, away from a society that mocks him and he cannot understand well. Candy wanting a place for securing his remaining future with Crooks wanting to have an acceptance and honour in the place he lives in all show

their yearning for a place away from an alienating place that fuels their vulnerability (Adhikari et al. 2022). Their vulnerability is a fuel for their collective dream of owning a farm despite being homeless and underpaid.

Fate

The theme of fate can be strongly presented through the journey of the character Lennie most specifically as Steinbeck's portrayal of the life and destiny of Lennie's life and actions. The novel is seen to be inspired from Robert Burn's poem that narrates the unpredictability of life and destiny's play to twist the promises of hope and joy into sorrow (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). Lennie is portrayed as a mentally disabled man that is undergoing the issues of comprehending the consequential effects of his actions. The narrative has made the illustration of Lennie and his disability as a crucial aspect that is present in the narration (Lawrence, 2020). His intellectual disability is one of his unique features and a potential instrument for shaping his destiny. Though, his affinities with animals are also characteristic to his nature. His narration of characteristics and metaphorical portal often dehumanises him as a mentally disabled person, a perception that is also present in the society.

Life's unpredictability can be seen through Lennie in a unique way as the novel proceeds. The fate of the collective dream of owning a farm was ironically related to the fate of Lennie and his life. The novel captures the tragic luck of Lennie and his life as well as the illustration of animals as symbolism of the character as well (Heavlin, 2021). Lennie and his lack of control on his strength made him accidentally kill the animals that he loves to pet (Lawrence, 2020). Again his urge to pet soft things in the case of the girl in the red dress in Weed or Curley's wife's hair and his impairment limiting him from realising the consequential results of his actions also symbolises the nature of destiny's precarious nature. He accidentally killing Curley's wife also leads to the unpredicted ruin of the collective dream of owning the farm. George killing Lennie as a helpless sign of not letting him worse being possibly killed by Curley is an ironic turn of events that seals the fate of all the characters and their dreams of owning a farm.

Christian, classical and natural influences

The novel looks through several analogies and metaphors that can be sourced through the Christian religion and classical literature among others. There is a significant impact of Steinbeck's inspirations in the literary crafting of the novel "Of Mice and Men". This can be seen through its illustration of multiple metaphorical presentations of biblical parallels and classical literatures such as Cain and Abel or the Arthurian legends (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). Steinbeck shared an interest in classical literature and had an affinity towards the legendary stories of King Arthur and the legends revolving around them (Shillinglaw, 2020). The novella was shaped by the writer as a playable novel, a form of novel that can also act as a play's script.

The novel has several instances through its development that speaks of the connection of the biblical stories inspiring the development of the novel. The

development of the novel and its reflection on the conditions of loneliness of man and their urge for companionship is a thematic element of the Old Testament (Goldhurst, 2009). These scenarios can be observed in multiple cases of the novel and its characters facing loneliness and lack of companionship. This is one of the strongly present and recurrent themes that are present in the novel's development alongside the themes of pleasure thwarting the dreams and loss of loved ones at the hand of self. The novel "Of Mice and Men" is set in the lands of California (Jassim, 2013). The land of California can be related to be similar to the biblical Promised Land or consequently the Garden of Eden. The novel also illustrated the non-morality of nature (Goldhurst, 2009). The novel also strongly implements the elements of nature as a symbolic portrayal of human mood through the reflection of natural sceneries as the mood's image.

Loss of paradise

The novel can be said as an illustrative example of George and Lennie undergoing hardships as an element that disrupts their long stay in any jobs and hence yearning for a place that they can call their own. The novel also shows the figurative hint on the biblical parallel of pleasure and temptation obstructing dreams and its realisation. The instances of curiosity tempted by the girl in Weed and later on Curley's wife are incidents that acted as major setbacks for Lennie and eventually George (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). This makes them leave their job in the former's case and later endangers Lennie's safety and the dream's fruition in the latter's case. Lennie's urge for touching soft things and his incapability due to his handicap for recognising the consequences that his actions can bring forth makes it eventually harsh for him, and him giving in to his temptations is fatal to him and the dream of the farm.

The character of Curley's wife is illustrated as the biblical character of Eve and her actions paralleled Eve's acts that led to the fall of man from the Garden of Eden. The character Curley's wife is painted to parallel Eve within the Garden of Eden and Curley's wife's intent for getting her wishes through her means of temptation is analogous to that of Eve's manipulation and luring (Bashar et al. 2019). Curley's wife is characterised as a parallel to Eve for her actions of tempting Lennie and his fuelling his curiosity that led to the ruin of the vision of the little farm that Lennie and the others had.

The novel spoke of the shared dream of the workers of the ranch, a dream that was shared by the characters George and Lennie, later are joined by Candy and Crooks. This dream is of theirs that illustrates a hope of secure, independent life and equality that faces hardships and also acts as the portrayal of the American dream of home, independence and security being shattered (Parrott, 2023). The portrayal of man giving into his temptations that leads to him losing his dreams and paradise is a metaphor that is present in the biblical stories, including the fall of Adam and Eve being similar to the characters failing to secure their dreams with the turn of events

(Goldhurst, 2009). The development of this novel on the themes of loneliness and wandering is common themes that parallel the characters' struggles of loneliness.

Brother's keeper

The development of the novel has several analogies and metaphorical parallels with the stories of Christianity such as the story of Cain and Abel. This is portrayed through the development of the bond of brotherhood and closeness of George and Lennie in the initial stages of the novel (Hadella, 2009). The paralleled similarity can be observed through the situation of George killing Lennie and being eventually damned for loneliness and grief losing his friend. Their brotherhood and the parallel of the statement of Cain being his brother's keeper can be seen throughout the imminent dependency that Lennie has on George and their uncommon bond of friendship growing with their dreams shared with Candy and Crooks, with Slim admiring their bond (Hadella, 2009). Their dreams eventually bite the dust with the death of Lennie, and George being left without his long-time friend and powerless.

This can be considered as a parallel presentation of the story of Cain being punished for his crimes of killing his brother Abel and forced to keep wandering in loneliness. Steinbeck, through his novel "Of Mice and Men" presents the duo George and Lennie as Cain and Abel (Person jr, 2009). This presentation is resulted as one that show's Abel's innocence resembling Lennie's innocence and curiosity and Caine's suffering and loneliness being driven by his sin of murdering his brother can be seen as though the character of George and his sufferings.

The dreams of every migrant are similar to the dreams of George and Lennie. The story can be compared with that of the biblical story of Cain and his brother which has the same impact in this story of George and Lennie. George, who was living his life with the barrier of his friend Lennie made him to be away from freedom of life (Person, 2009). The lack of freedom in the life of George has made him take the decision of killing his loyal friend Lennie. After the death of his friend Lennie, George was left alone with a wander from place to place without any goals and purpose of life.

Nature of life

Steinbeck has tried to narrate the dreams of every small farm that has disappeared because of the wrong decisions made by Lennie of using it wisely. The nature of dreams and man's propensity for cruelty and injustice is similar to the life of Arthur and his noble (Goldhurst, 2009). Lennie, who is a migrant worker and handicapped by nature always depends on recommendation or suggestion of his mate George. George, who is also a migrant worker, takes the responsibility of Lennie in every situation of giving him care that he needs and making decisions for him. From Steinbeck's point of view we can acknowledge the instability of Lennie in making decisions. The weaknesses of Lennie can be considered as one the important factors of the story. Both Lennie and George have always dreamt of making their little farm a successful venture (Niewiadomska-Flis, 2005). But the unskillful and cunning act

of George and Lennie always made their farm imperfect and kept them away from perfection.

The humanitarian act of care and love of George towards Lennie and the faith and fidelity of Lennie for George creates some key elements and moments in the story. Since the death of Lennie's aunt, George has taken over the responsibility of Lennie who is mentally handicapped. George (Cliffnotes.com, 2023). At the same time, George never hesitates to share and tell the story to others of how he has taken over the responsibility of Lennie's life. George also gifts Lennie with a pup and cracks a joke at Lennie's charm towards the pup and advises him to protect himself from that little and jealous guy Curly.

George also tells and shares the unpleasant feeling to Slim when he cracks a joke on Lennie and he also promises to avoid doing such an act on Lennie. Lennie often observes and replicates the actions of his friend George. At the climax of the story George was completely frustrated with the impact of Lennie's life on him (Indian, 2009). George also criticized Lennie because he forgets quickly which makes it complicated for George to repeatedly do or tell the information to Lennie. The frustration of George made him kill his sympathetic friend Lennie. George also briefs the loyalty of his friend Lennie who would easily do whatever he says without thinking about it. The Whole Story deliberates the bond and connection between George and Lennie who promise to keep their faithfulness to each other.

Nature

Each character in the story is directly or indirectly affiliated to nature. The author also chooses the nature to brief his characters in the story. Steinbeck has used animals multiple times in the story that defines the character of human behavior. Nature was the place to Lennie where he would return whenever he faced problems (Spilka, 2009). Nature is a paradise that can keep safe and secure from all sorts of problems and human cruelty. Similarly, Lennie's life describes the lack of freedom in his life where nature offers and helps to keep away from the cruel society of humans. The dreams of George and Lennie may not be different from others. The return of Lennie to the pond signifies how a place of joy can turn into a place of anxiety and friendlessness. The behavior of humans can be reflected with the emotional state of nature that lacks the freedom of security.

The lack of judgment and habit of Lennie has made the objective to think about how Lennie adjusts his life into civil society. For example, we can refer to a pool which seems to be a place of freedom that separates us from the world of humans. Sometimes believing in a dream can be a place of destruction as we forget the value of friendships and togetherness. However, one can say that paradise has been lost (Owens, 2002). The water snake can also take us back to the biblical story of Eden where the intensity of sin appeared in the form of a snake with the cause of destruction to humanity.

The thought of Steinbeck defines that nature is a place that is free from poisons and can be the root of strength and freedom for any person who is aware of the flow of nature. The author also used the word animals to refer to the emotions and behavior of humans (Bashar et al. 2019). Lennie's size and strength is frequently compared to the size of a bear. Steinbeck tried to illustrate the characters with different thoughts that can remove loneliness with friendship. The relationships of Lennie and George display the importance of friendship and bond that were present in them which can eliminate the barrier of feeling loneliness, anxiety and lack of friendship.

Conclusion

Steinbeck's novel "Of Mice and Men" is a unique novella that also acts as a playable novel acting as a play's script and a short novel. Steinbeck's work in the novel is distinctive with the development of the characters being strongly aligned with the themes of the novel, making the thematic reflection of the characters and their journeys. The novel portrays the themes of loneliness, dreams, barriers, powerlessness, fate and so on, themes that are present in the novel's enactment and the characters themselves in particular. The novel also produces parallels with classical literature, Arthurian legends and Christian stories that all reflect the nature, characteristics of the characters and the themes of the novel.

References:

- Adhikari, A., Gartaula, S. and Neupane, T., 2022. Geographical Alienation of Migrant Ranch Workers in John. *KMC RESEARCH*, p.1.
- Alnajm, A.L., 2020. OF MICE AND MEN: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE LIFE OF AMERICAN SOCIETY VIA READING STEINBECK'S NOVELLA. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Development Research*, 4(1), pp.83-95.
- Aristide, M.M., 2019. The Collapse of the American Dream during the Great Depression in John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2(3), pp.12-18.
- Bashar, K.U., Zeb, A. and Khan, H., 2019. Stereotyping of Curley's Wife in Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men: From Derridean Perspective. *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 7(3), pp.95-99.
- Basu, D., 2020. Of mice and men The unforgettable narrative of how social factors shape substance use, addiction, and recovery. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 36(4), pp.270-276.
- Cliffsnotes.com, 2023. *Critical Essays Major Themes*. Available at: <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/of-of-mice-and-men/critical-essays/major-themes> [Accessed on: 1st December 2024]
- Ganiyeva, O.K. and Rajabova, Z.T., 2023. The Analysis of Loneliness theme in of Mice and Men. *MiastoPrzyszłości*, 31, pp.157-159.

- Goldhurst, W., 2009. John Steinbeck's Parable of the Curse of Cain. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's*, pp.49-61.
- Hadella, C., 2009. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, pp.134-149.
- Heavilin, B.A., 2021. A "background never stated" Mice, Snakes, Dogs, and Rabbits in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. *steinbeck review*, 18(2), pp.136-148.
- Hui, Q., 2022. A STUDY OF SPATIAL NARRATIVE IN *OF MICE AND MEN*. *European Journal of Humanities* and, p.10.
- Indian, P.T., 2009. CHAPTER TWENTY ONE IS THE LONELIEST NUMBER: STEINBECK'S PARADOXICAL ATTRACTION AND REPULSION TO ISOLATION/SOLITUDE. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, p.290.
- Jassim, A.A., 2013. The Use of the Bible in Two Selected Novels of Steinbeck. *Adab AL Rafidayn*,43(67), pp.95-110.
- Lawrence, C., 2020. Is Lennie a monster? A reconsideration of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in a 21st century inclusive classroom context. *Palgrave Communications*, 6(1), pp.1-8.
- Niewiadomska-Flis, U., 2005. The Relationship between an Individual and a Society: Adjustment Disorders of John Steinbeck's Characters. *Rocznikihumanistyczne*, 53(05), pp.49-65.
- Owens, L., 2002. Deadly kids, stinking dogs, and heroes: The best laid plans in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. *Western American Literature*, 37(3), pp.319-333.
- Parrott, K., 2023. The Ruin of "Best-Laid Plans": Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Yates's Revolutionary Road. *Steinbeck Review*, 20(1), pp.101-116.
- Person jr, L.S., 2009. CHAPTER TWELVE OF *MICE AND MEN*: STEINBECK'S SPECULATIONS IN MANHOOD. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, p.150.
- Shaalán, B.S., 2020. A Psychological Reading of The Problem of the Black in John Steinbeck's *Of (Mice and Men)*. *Journal of the College of Languages (JCL)*,(41), pp.74-85.
- Shillinglaw, S., 2020. Biography in Depth: John Steinbeck, American Writer. *The Steinbeck Institute John Steinbeck: Social Critic and Ecologist*. Erişim Tarihi, 15, p.2020.
- Singh, J. and Tyagi, P., 2021. Theme of Alienation in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. *The Creative launcher*, 6(5), pp.124-129.
- Spilka, M., 2009. Of George and Lennie and Curley's Wife: Sweet Violence in Steinbeck's *Eden*. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's*, pp.62-72.