

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: A Review

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Author	John Steinbeck
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John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a touching tale of the friendship between two men set against the backdrop of the United States during the Depression of the 1930s. Subtle in its characterization, the book addresses the real hopes and dreams of working-class America. Steinbeck's short novel raises the lives of the poor and dispossessed to a higher, symbolic level.

The novella is poignant and a very emotional narration of friendship between two farm hands for hire (George Milton and Lennie Small) who found a strong bond despite their different personality and great disparity in mental acuity; Lennie is a towering and strong fellow with a mental age of a child, while George is an able-bodied man with a “big brother” concern towards Lennie due to the latter’s disability.

Set against the 1930s Great Depression in America, the two friends set out to find work in a farm after running away from the last town they worked in because Lennie got fascinated with the soft texture of a woman's dress that he caressed it to the point the woman felt uncomfortable, and he'd been accused of rape for that.

For some time, they have been dreaming of having their own farm with many kinds of livestock, poultry, and particularly rabbits for Lennie because they are soft and cuddly, just like puppies and mice, which end up maimed or dead since Lennie has no sense of control of his strength over things that he finds fascinating. Until he and George find work in another farm where Lennie gets fascinated with the soft beautiful hair of the young flirtatious wife of the farm owner. The flirtatious wife becomes agitated that she is starting to scream to get out of Lennie's hold on her hair. Lennie shakes her so hard and muzzles her mouth in order to calm her down but in the process of doing so he accidentally breaks her neck because he does not know how to control his strength. Lennie runs for safety towards the predesignated meeting place in the woods that George and him agreed upon because he is being chased by the rest of the farm workers for having killed the farm owner's wife.

George separates himself from the vengeful mob and runs straight to Lennie's whereabouts, and tells him to look to the horizon and imagine their dream farm with lots of rabbits that he can pet. As George helps Lennie fire up his imagination, he walks behind him, draws a gun and points it to the back of Lennie's head. George would rather see Lennie dead by his own hands rather than see him caught and killed by the angry mob.

Such a powerful ending is both extremely shocking and thought-provoking. Steinbeck was able to capture the triumph and tragedy of friendship between two working-class men in the 1930s America where issues of sexism and prejudice towards people with disabilities and lack of means to achieve their life dreams can become even more entangled in social injustice. No doubt, this is still happening in modern society that *Of Mice and Men* can be considered a timeless masterpiece for successfully portraying social ills and showcasing them on the individual level.

I haven't forgotten the tragic story of George and Lennie, and when I came across Steinbeck's novella in a film of the same title, I watched it and the tragedy of the two characters never left

my mind. I guess other people who have read the book or watched the movie felt the same way as I did, hence *Of Mice and Men* is quite popular.

George and Lennie are not cavaliers, or war heroes, treading, or spies - they are migrant workers, living in conditions in California that many in the late 1930s and onward would relate to. There are some very kind moments in the book where the characters talk about their philosophies and their dreams for what they could do with just a little more money.

It's not a very long book - Steinbeck is able to communicate what he needs to say in short scenes with hard-hitting imagery. He is also able to tug at the readers heartstrings very easily or hit home with a shocking image.

This is all done without a preponderance of gore or even much profanity. There is violence, but it is used sparingly. Something today's writers should take into account when they are writing.

It absolutely achieves its purpose by presenting a various number of ideas in a simple way. Steinbeck's use of :

1. Colloquial language gives the readers an idea of how the ranch workers used to talk, live and feel which connects the readers with the characters.
2. Foreshadowing helps the readers to anticipate which makes it interesting.

He showed us what genuine friendship feels like; what it feels like to have someone by your side through your thick and thin, what it feels like to have someone to talk and share each and everything that happens in your life.

He showed us how lack of communication and expression of feelings can affect a society as a whole. He showed us what issues affect each and every person no matter how different they are in terms of nationality, race and gender.

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I think most people recognize that the story describes how easy it is for “best laid plans of mice and men” to “often go astray” but it is how you respond that matters. Some readers decide it advises existential surrender, that all plans will likely fail. But life goes on, so what next? They forget that failure can be the best teacher. Not all plans lead to irredeemable situations, and it is by understanding this that we can learn from them enough to perfect our dreams and create them. Worst case scenario, we provide wisdom for future generations, perhaps by answering questions like these. But it is through terrible failures that inspired great wonders we are able to speak on this today online. We can even thrive without making the same mistakes to begin with now.

But you might say that it was a criticism of strength without wisdom, in the case of Lennie. Indeed that is a valid critique of many historically bloody conflicts that could have been resolved with a touch of intelligence. Or perhaps more accurately, the many well-intentioned acts that caused great harm. For instance, many missionaries visiting the Americas for the first time indirectly murdered hundreds of thousands through diseases, paving the way for easy conquest by more ambitious visitors.

Yet another view could be a satire on capital punishment as a means of dealing with criminals who often do not know any better. For many centuries the non-neurotypical folk were rumored to be placed in prison with the worst criminals purely because they did not act the same way or could not learn customs quickly enough. Before that they were simply killed, abandoned or hung. In this story the only “solution” they could think of is killing Lennie over an accident, but the fact that he was not given proper responsible observation is indicative of a greater problem. Then there is the lack of wisdom in the case of obvious mistakes. Even today some suffer greatly in car accidents simply because some lawyers can sue and collect a percentage of that income,

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regardless of who is really at fault. In reality, both are and so are many other factors. Only in insurance company legal jargon is fault forced onto a single individual, something that is objectively not possible, and morally as unfair as possible.

Since this book was published in 1937, it would almost certainly be a critique of political issues of that era, such as sexuality being “evil” in a puritanical America. Would the woman be murdered by innocence incarnate if she had not felt that way? It’s highly contrived but an obvious sentiment in those pre-sexual revolution days when even discussing it was forbidden, which only increased misunderstanding at the time.

As for today, I do not think it relates very well as it mostly reflects outdated concerns and assumptions. We now are better able to work with and provide for all mentalities of human, and will continue to improve with time. We are much more willing to give women a choice in who they marry equally, rather than assume marriage is the default man’s choice. Financial potential and equity is far more accessible in this age, and social programs exist to help those who might not be able to provide for themselves, so the duo would not face such severe situations today. If anything, perhaps disease is still a problem due to inequitable cost of insurance, which is often seen as an artificial middle man to actual care which is a basic human right to live a healthy life. Back then they had no choice if they caught a disease, and today the poor have no choice because of financial and political hurdles that ensure death by denying coverage despite the technology existing to allow life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. An unexpected parallel, if not a disappointing critique of how little has changed for our dynamic duo in health care access despite sweeping financial, political and technological advancement.

Of Mice and Men is a tale of friendship that triumphs over the odds. But, the novel is also extremely telling about the society in which it is set. Without becoming dogmatic or formulaic, the novel examines many of the prejudices at the time: racism, sexism, and prejudice towards those with disabilities. The power of John Steinbeck's writing is that he treats these issues in purely human terms. He sees society's prejudices in terms of individual tragedies, and his characters attempt to escape from those prejudices.

In a way, *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, one they cannot achieve. Even though the dream never becomes reality, John Steinbeck does leave us with an optimistic message. George and Lennie do not achieve their dream, but their friendship stands out as a shining example of how people can live and love even in a world of alienation and disconnectedness.