



Of Mice & Men

Blurb

John Steinbeck – Born 1902 in Salinas, California into a relatively wealthy family. He chose to write about the lives of poor farm labourers after spending his summer s working locally as a hired ranch hand where his experiences of rural California & its people impressed him deeply. Of Mice & Men (O.M.A.M) was published in 1957, intended to be dramatised into a stage play, each part is like an extended scene, taking place over three days the simple language & colloquial phrases represent that used by the farm workers.

The title is inspired by a poem by Robert Burns – The best laid schemes O' Mice & Men. The poem pointing to no matter how hard or well we plan for something our plans can often fail to become reality... or worse, they can end up going terribly wrong.

Background Context

Although a fictional story it is deeply rooted in historical fact.

1929- Wall Street Crash – New York Stock Market plummeted in value & millions of ordinary people lost millions.
1931 – The Great Depression – Banks & factories closed & farming collapsed. 1933 – Franklin D Roosevelt becomes President. 1936 – The 'New Deal' – Support for unemployment. 1937 – Of Mice & Men is published. Over a decade until it started to recover, during this time over a third of the population were unemployed (15 million). High unemployment resulted in many travelling to find work making Farm owners very powerful, able to hire & fire at will.

Farmers & the Dust Bowl

The farm crops dropped in value, so farmers had to produce more to earn the same. During the 'Great Depression' economic & ecological forces (Dust Bowl) brought t many rural poor & migrant agricultural workers from the great plain states – Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas. These droughts ruined crops & dried up soil so hundreds of thousands of farmers headed to California – 'The Promised Land' due to the state's mild climate providing a longer growing season. The soil better allowing a wider range of crops offering more opportunities to harvest –

The American Dream

The 'American Dream' has been a concept since the 17th century. Immigrants dreamed of a better life in America, making their fortune in the Goldfields. For many the dream became a nightmare. Thousands left mid-west & made their way west to California like George & Lennie. Clinging on to the dream that one day they would earn enough to buy a little house & live off the "Fatta the Lan". O.M.A.M shows that for poor migrant workers during the depression the 'American Dream' became an illusion & trap, never getting their dream of life, liberty, & happiness they sought. Crook says in O.M.A.M "Nobody ever gets to Heaven, & nobody gets no land". O.M.A.M suggests that for a full & meaningful life it must contain dreams. George & Lennie never achieve their dream, but it holds their friendship. The dream gives them life, even if life never allows them to achieve their dreams.

Dreams

No is truly happy, everyone missing something. The Farm hands had nowhere to go; living month by month they had no real ambitions & dreams in life. George & Lennie's dream is just words repeated. At start they are 'rhythmically' spoken but at the end 'monotonously'. George finally accepts that dreams don't come true, the dream becoming a burden. George's dreams die with Lennie & he is resigned to a single life, an easy option/life but it isn't the Paradise Farm that he secretly wanted. George becomes the same as all the other Farm hands. Steinbeck showing that normal people's dreams don't come true.

Adopted Lennie as a friend, bitter, worried, weary, serious.

George

George never had any problems when on his own; he is in a trapped relationship with Lennie through a sense of loyalty. Lennie's minder & instructor he is constantly worried Lennie will get into trouble. Lennie in the way, George regrets not having a girlfriend; he holds a moody complicated commitment to Lennie. His life could go either way – dream farm or life of work & small pay. George hates Curley because he has things he hasn't & hasn't earned them. George generally hates his life having no control over it, obeying others, tied to Lennie & work. Getting a hard time, weary he wants to escape. His dream keeps him going initially. Though at the end, George thinks whatever you do in life makes no difference- nothing.

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Setting & Place

Tight structure of plot, 3 days 4 locations make it like a play. Salinas River, Ranch Bunkhouse, Crook's room, the main barn. Salinas River is presented as a perfect world, evoking beauty, serenity – Garden of Eden – perfect to prove throughout O.M.A.M this perfection cannot be sustained. The idyllic scene mirrors the idealised Lennie & George friendship. It is also where they reveal their dream. By the pool it is idyllic – no work or bunkhouse boss. There is water to drink & wood for fire. However this paradise is an illusion – water looks nice but George warns Lennie that it looks scummy. It's scary; there are water snakes, and herons that eat them and with Coyotes that would eat the herons. This showing it is survival of the fittest. With O.M.A.M opening & closing in nature, Steinbeck connects & compares the actions of his characters with the natural world. George & Lennie disrupt the peaceful scene, the killing of heron prefigures the final tragedy, structuring O.M.A.M giving it a feeling of wholeness & reinforces Lennie's incompatibility with the social world. With him not fitting in shared spaces, bunkhouse etc. In contrast he romanticises the natural world promising to live like a bear in a cave – can't live with men, can't live without them, therefore in the end he can't live at all.

Lennie Small

A.C.H.A.V – Animal, child, aggressor, victim, tame, friendly, big stupid, strong, forgetful, violent, childish, like an animal.

Steinbeck based Lennie on a real person who was sent to a lunatic asylum for stabbing a ranch boss in the stomach with a pitch fork. Small thinking & big boy is bad news. Unaware of his own strength, he is unable to gauge other peoples & animals weaknesses. A Huge grown man, with a childish/childlike mentality with characteristics of Innocence, exuberance, love & trust but also bad characteristics such as unchecked anger, irresponsibility, & unable to connect his actions to their consequences. Lennie couldn't survive on his own with a limited intelligence he trusts George completely. He shares a dream with George to own a piece of land, Lennie's job to tend rabbits has no independence or practical skills like most adults. Lennie wouldn't be able to sort food or shelter despite him repeatedly offering to go off on his own & live in a cave (like an animal). George stimulates his mind filling it of dreams. Lennie has little self-restraint, everything he does is in extremes. He is liable to panic when someone else does. In these panic attacks things tend to happen too suddenly the tragedy of his life-friendliness turns to aggression. This aggression is innocent, making it different to others. Lennie is killed & with it dies George's reason for believing he could live independently on a farm.

Animals

Lennie identifies with animals. From childhood he has befriended them before people, they have to be cuddly. Lennie is compared to a bear. Stubborn & possessive to his animals, he drools & slaves over beautiful women. Like an animal he walks like a bear – dragging his paws. Eats & drinks like a hungry animal (horse). Has a sex drive like an animal with a desire to stroke things such as the ladies dress & Curley's wife's hair. Descriptions point toward him more like an animal, than a child. Animals innocent do not have the capacity to act morally or know good from bad. Animals can be dangerous not unlike Lennie. No morals acting just on instinct. The only way Lennie copes is to be like a tame dog, tethered to his master George. Not to be let out of sight, yet also like a wild dog – needing to be 'put down' by his owner.

Lennie's pup, Candy's dog

Candy's once powerful dog is now old & useless. Carlson's killing of the dog make it clear that during the depression only the strongest survived. With the dog being killed by a single gunshot to the back of the head, it foreshadows Lennie's death by George. Lennie, like the dog – he is powerless, innocent, doomed. Lennie's puppy is entirely dependent, like Lennie is to George, symbolising fate of the weak in the face of the strong.

Candy

Really old, weak, friendly loner, victim of life of work, lost his hand, dog & his dreams.

Frail & powerless Candy is like his dog. No one tries to save his dog. Candy has the least respected farm job & the one always left behind on workdays. Curley goes doctors, to lynch Lennie. At the end Candy is left behind with Curley's dead wife, dead dream, & memories of his dead dog.

The killing of Lennie

All the options are bad with no good solution. Prison- might be ok if George could get him there. Lynching – He would die a horrible death, tortured by Curley. Hide – Lennie isn't smart enough to survive. George doesn't consider running away together – Believing they can't get away with it this time. Death becomes Lennie's new dream; the only way he will achieve his dream- George wants Lennie to die happy & gets Lennie to monotonously repeat his dream. George knows he has to, he can hear the mob closing in. A mercy killing would be far different to a lynching & the better option. Slim says it all – 'You hadda, George. I swear you hadda' & he did to let Lennie die with dignity.

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

O.M.A.M is set at a specific time & place. Soledad means loneliness in Spanish, where all the characters are lonely. Weed is where Lennie did a 'bad thing'.

Weed is a plant that nobody wants, deprives space, nice plants & food.

The pool is where the story is born & where the dream farm & Lennie meet their end. The Bunkhouse represents the spot where conflict, cruelty, violence, jealousy & Suspicion arise. Crooks room represents the retreat (Jail cell) of the repressed; here is discrimination, name calling, isolation, fear, & threat of death. The Barn represents a safe place, animals find warmth & shelter. A man-made place where humans care for animals, it is symbolically ironic because it's where Lennie kills his puppy & Curley's wife. The dream farm is symbolic of Lennie & George's friendship, ties them together, them working when times are hard. This vision is a personal form of religion, their version of heaven, Re-telling the dream serving as a form of litany/catechism. So when Lennie kills a human being, their chances of going there are ruined forever. Rabbits represent Lennie's dreams & impossibility of fulfilment.

This simple wish shows his simple thinking. The farm for George is freedom but Lennie simply access to soft things. Previous evidence shows that these rabbits will be added to his trail of dead animals – symbolizing Lennie's inability to see patterns in life & to recognise failure imminent. Rabbits never actually appear in O.M.A.M showing unfortunate reality, Lennie's dreams can't materialize.

Lennie is symbolic of the 'wise fool' mentally inferior, speaks honestly, symbol of people mistreated due to mental handicapped. Curley's wife is symbolic of Eve – She brings sin & death to the world, symbol of women everywhere repressed by male centred societies. The character Crook is symbolic of people discriminated due to age. Carlson is symbolic of those oblivious to others feelings, only concerned if it affects them. The character Slim is symbolic of a leader, strength, George symbolic of the 'everyman' – a normal, average person. Their names describe their characters, Curley – tense wound up like a spring. Slim – tall & elegant. Crooks – Has a crooked back. Candy – an ironic name as his life has been anything but sweet. Lennie's surname being Small, He is big but small minded.

Loneliness, isolation

All Bunkhouse men are single like orphans. George says 'they got no family' with nothing to look forward to. George plays solitaire. Lennie & George have each other but George still feels lonely. Their relationship is like an unequal marriage – George has all the responsibility. When anyone tries to grab hold of someone else it ends in disaster - Curley's marriage, Lennie holding animals, holding the girls skirt & Curley's wife. He has a real need for companionship.

Curley

The Boss' son, selfish & aggressive.

Small he has developed an inferior complex & looks to assert his masculinity. He holds a reputation of a fighter due to being an ex-boxer. However he picks on the weak. No one on the farm likes him & he has no control over his wife.

Curley's Wife

Letter essentially good, trusting, grew up in an atmosphere of fighting & suspicion.

Her pretence of hardness is a sham. She is a disruptive influence. She is the only real woman George & Lennie meet. All men apart from Slim are wary of her. Lennie dazzled by her soft beauty that he wants to touch. No one seems to love her; she is always looking for Curley, perhaps really looking for happiness. She lost her dream of being in the movies, marrying Curley on the rebound. Not stupid she is aware of the power she holds over Curley & Candy. A woman in a man's world, her name is unknown & only referred to as Curley's wife. A possession, she has no individual existence of her own. Sexuality being her only weapon.

