"We'd have our place where we belonged": Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and the Quest for a Lost Eden

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Abstract

This is a paper that looks into Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and men* examining the dreamers' vision of a life that gets them out of their miserable existence as poor workers. Its aim is to examine the reasons of the failure of the dream which the protagonists attempt to transform into reality. This is done by analysing such characters in terms of their capacities as questers, and the type of life they aspire to get in the light of its validity or relevance to their present status as workers or labourers.

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The idea of quest is originally a religious one, drawing on the Bible. John Steinbeck (1902-1968), the well-known twentieth-century American novelist, draws constantly, in his prose, on the Bible, folklore, the Arthurian tales, and Walt Whitman, to name but few obvious sources. Steinbeck's protagonists are characteristically on the move, as they are migrants workers, labourers, and so on. Throughout their journeys across the country in search of job, home, or a better life, they meet different types of people, and the events that take place are conditioned by either the nature of plans these figures have already set up or by the hazards they must go through with the view to realizing their goals. Yet, Frohock, in studying Steinbeck's works, asserts that Steinbeck is not merely interested in the picaresque form of novel; the novelist, here, goes so far as to reinvent it in such a way as to let his characters, while living by their wits, unconcerned with the moral codes and thus are capable of both "brutality and tenderness." These are picaroons who may or may not possess the moral sense of their traditional peers, and their destination, although reached at the end, will never be a satisfactory resolution of their trouble.

Like the characters of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and other contemporary novelists, Steinbeck's heroes are basically dreamers. Warren French, in his study of Steinbeck, seems to argue that dreamers in Steinbeck are always doomed due to the failure of nature to grant man the sort of life of which he has been dreaming. Accordingly, the heroes of *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Pearl* (1947) choose, though unwillingly, to destroy or end their own dreams, as they evidently prove no longer valid, sustainable, or realizable.

However, this sense of predestination or determinism that holds in more than literary work of the period does not necessarily find expression in Steinbeck's other masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), where the author apparently seems to challenge the conception of human race's destiny in an indifferent universe. Steinbeck's novels of the thirties, including *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *In Dubious Battle* (1936), are deeply rooted in the contemporary social chaos of the Great Depression. Violent action is, in a way, meant for humanitarian purposes or at least justified, as Frohock tends to suggest, as long as those who are involved in a quest for social justice are denied their natural rights.

The quest for power and glory that ends with a sweeping success is echoed in Steinbeck's first novel *Cup of Gold* (1929). Although a work of an immature writer, it has its illuminating aspects and cathartic values showing that Steinbeck probably tried to rid himself, through the pages
describing the life of the buccaneer Henry Morgan, of "the values of his time which he inherited but did not actually accept."?

In *Of Mice and Men*, George Milton and Lennie Small spend most of their time dreaming of having a farm of their own. Having found their job through an employment company, George and Lennie have come to work in a ranch where they meet Candy, an old disabled swamper; the boss; his arrogant son; Curley; Curley's wife; Slim, the mule skinner; Carlson; and Crooks, the black stable hand. The story is set on large California ranches during the Depression, a period in which men had to go from one ranch to ranch to find work. The major conflict in the story evolves mainly from the antagonism of the migrants' difficult conditions and other external forces. Carrying their own possessions, “bindles,” with them, they are, for the most part, helpless, for they can lose their low-paid jobs so easily. They are lonely, having no families. Nevertheless, their fate is decided yet by another factor. Accordingly, conflict is encountered when some personal defects play no less significant role than that of those forces.

In an essay on *Of Mice and Men*, critic C. C. Hadella refers to a significant issue that other critics have already noted. Since the Garden of Eden myth is clearly alluded to in the novel, Steinbeck appropriates Edenic elements to convey his personal interpretation of the American Dream. The role of woman in the Edenic framework is that of the temptress, the despoiler of the Garden. Therefore, the mythical discourse of the fiction dictates that a woman precipitates the exile from Paradise. In the novel, Curley's wife plays this role of the seductive "tart" that will provide the catalyst for the later tragic events, resulting in not only her and Lennie’s destruction, but also the obliteration of the very basis on which George’s and Lennie’s dream has been founded.

To realize a dream, the author argues, there must be a friendship of a special kind. Those friendships made are either temporary or ordinary. The mentally retarded Lennie must depend on or rely on the comparatively self-sufficient George, who is the more intelligent, mature and inexperienced in managing the farm. Without this friendship, neither of them could practically sustain the dream. With this friendship, the dream becomes a possibility. Steinbeck uses dramatic irony to suggest the remoteness of the possibility of fulfilling the dream. Though there are obstacles, there is still a chance of achieving it with the intelligent George and the physically powerful Lennie. In the end, both men and their dream are defeated by circumstances or by chance. The handicapped in the migrant world are doomed or fated.

The river bank and the ranch provide, on one level, the idyllic and real boundaries of the two guys' imaginary, utopian world. The centrally placed bunk house and barn, offering only physical security and a minimum of that, symbolize the essential emptiness and impersonality of that world. The fundamental symbol which keeps the two men together, stimulates hope for two others (Candy and Crooks), and very likely expresses the hopes of still others, is the dream in itself: “a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs ...”12 The impossibility of dream, however, is articulated in Crooks’ pessimistic but truthful and realistic viewpoint:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. .... They come, an’ they quit an’ go on; an’ every damn one of ’em’s got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ’em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever’ body wants a little piece of lan’.... Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It’s just in their head. They’re all the time talkin’ about it, but it’s jus’ in their head.” (p. 74)

Yet, the first thing that undermines the quest and puts an end to the dream of restoring the lost Eden, as Watt suggests, lies in the very incongruity of the questing pair. George is alert and shrewd; rough, contemptuous and callous in manner; Lennie, pathetically eager to please, imitating his friend, barely able to think or remember the simplest things.13 It is strange for Slim to see such a "cuckoo like him [Lennie] and a smart little guy [George] ... travelin' together" (p. 39). Bodily strong but mentally feeble, as he is, Lennie is, after all, a "nice fella" (p. 40). George declares to Slim that he (George) is used to Lennie, and is ready to reiterate the soothing “ritual phrases invoking the
peaceful promised land” for him over and over. The recurrent description of the dream vision of “a house and a couple of acres” is a “set speech, without strong conviction, demonstrating George’s understanding of the unlikelihood of the dream but also of its necessity to both inspire and control his companion.”

Lennie, as a matter of fact, as innocent as a child, which relatively removes his responsibility for what he does. Jeffery D. Schultz finds it strange that nothing much is known about this friendship or about George’s acceptance of responsibility for a fellow human being to whom he has no blood relationship.

The real problem with Lennie is that he often gets himself and his companion in trouble; he is, like "a big baby," in a compulsive love with petting such nice "soft things" (p. 90) as mice, puppies, rabbits, or a women’s dresses or hair. It is Lennie’s foolishness or imbecility that has caused his and George’s expulsion from their job, as Lennie has been caught feeling the dress of a girl. Therefore, without George's watchful eye, he, while trying to express his infantile reactions, could easily kill what he touches. Thus, he needs George to act like his guardian. Lennie, in Howard Levant's opinion, is "the reduction of humanity to the lowest common denominator." Rather than being an allegorical representation of insanity; Lennie is the "inarticulate and powerful yearnings of all." In like manner, he is a symbol for the animal appetites in man: the craving to touch and feel and the impulse towards immediate gratification of sensual desires.

However, it seems that Lennie's falling in trouble is inevitable, the thing which is anticipated by George in Part One, when he tells Lennie to hide in the brush at the same spot where they are until he (George) comes for him in case he (Lennie) gets in trouble. Furthermore, it is, more or less, foreshadowed by Lennie's petting of a dead mouse in the same part, and his killing of a "puppy" while petting it in Part Four. The climax of the action is when Lennie, unintentionally does "another bad thing" by killing Curley's wife, who is their boss’s daughter-in-law, while he has been feeling her hair. Fully aware that "Lennie never done it in meanness" (p. 95), George feels the necessity to act. His final shooting of Lennie to save him from lynching is foreshadowed by the earlier shooting of Candy's useless, stinking sheepdog by Carlson. Levant argues that Lennie dies necessarily because friendship can go no further than it does go, and nothing can be made of the dreamlike idea of the little farm.

Although left free, George ultimately recognizes or senses the utter futility and loneliness of his new life. Although he expresses more than once to Lennie, especially in time of his frustration, that his life without him (Lennie) would be much brighter and easier: "I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail" (p. 7), he, in putting up with Lennie's foolish and fatal mistakes, "gains" from him "as much as he gives." In accordance with one reading of the novel, Lennie becomes a personification of the division between mind and body. George is motivated to protect Lennie as he realizes that the latter is "the reverse image of his own human nature." With Lennie gone, the possibility of realizing the dream is gone forever.

Yet the very idea of the quest for an Edenic life is in itself defective. It may very likely be a reaction to their hopeless, difficult life, as George, addressing Lennie, declares: "We'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house" (p. 57). With Candy's remark that the land they are looking can be anywhere: "[it] might be any place" (p. 59), realizing their dream is increasingly becoming possible: "This thing they had they had never believed in was coming true" (p. 60). However, the overemphasis on the perfect quality of the aspired life undermines the very basis for such a life:

An’ we could have a few pigs. I could build a smoke house like the one gran’pa had, an’ when we kill a pig we can smoke the bacon and the hams, and make sausage an’ all like that. An’ when the salmon run up river we could catch a hundred of ‘em an’ salt ‘em down or smoke ‘em. We could have them for breakfast .... When the fruit come in we could can it—and tomatoes, they’re easy to can. Ever’ Sunday we’d kill a chicken or a rabbit. Maybe we’d have a cow or a goat, and the cream is so God damn thick you got to cut it with a knife and take it out with a spoon. (p. 57)
The violent incidents of Curley's punching of Lennie without mercy and the subsequent Lennie's grabbing and crushing of Curley's hand suggest that "Curley's sadistic vision of the world will not be shut out by the idealized vision of the cooperative friends". The too much idealized, simple life envisioned by Lennie and George where “[a]in’t gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from ‘em” (p. 106) is by no means compatible with the reality of the dreamers as drifters, first, and with that of America’s economic failure during the years of Depression, second. Thus, with the plan excessively idealized, the probability is that life, even if they obtained the farm, “would not consist of the comfort, plenty, and inter-personal harmony they envision.”

One reading of *Of Mice and Men* the novel gives rise to approaching it as a parable, having the form and characters appropriately. Despite the fact that loneliness is a recurrent theme in the novel, many of Steinbeck's characters are, more or less, personified types rather than realized persons. The writer intends the novel, as he himself puts it, to be a microcosmic "study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world." The wanderings of George and Lennie implies that they are just two men of many who have engaged in a hard search and have camped at the place on the river.

Similarly, Old Candy, helpless to stop the shooting of his dog, knows very well that he too will be banished when he is no longer useful. Nevertheless, he, with his saved money and his eagerness to buy a share in George's and Lennie's dream, is, at least, a moral drive for both to go on in their hard life. Crooks, as a result of his skin colour, lives in isolation and exclusion. Curley's unnamed wife wanders around the ranch in a "wistful quest" for some kind of human contact. Her dream, which predicts her abortive quest, is to be merely in pictures - to become a Hollywood cinematic image that occupies no space in the real world. She is so unfortunate that she is doomed to destruction at the hands of Lennie simply because she is just another soft, furry thing.

Critic David K. Matthews states that Steinbeck's stereotyped characters signify his general concern with the migratory workers. The use of those type characters who are allowed no originality, Matthews goes on to argue, is appropriate to the author's deterministic theme, which is shown in the contrast between the contrasting images of nature in the first and last chapters of the book.

In the opening chapter of Steinbeck's novel, nature looks quite, calm, full of life, energetic, and peaceful, as if in harmony with the man's hope for a better future and his ambition to attain the desired life he feels that it must be somewhere in this world. Here is how nature initially looks like in this context:

… but on the valley side the water is lined with trees— willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter’s flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of ‘coons, and with the spreadpads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark. (p. 1)
water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically. (p. 99)

The wildlife and vegetation, as Matthews emphasizes, are so equally described both times that the impression given is that of timelessness; time has not actually progressed at all. The same setting in which the novella begins and ends suggests a “never ending circle to human endeavour.” It is actually more than a little spot by the river where the two meet; coming to it symbolizes a retreat from the world to a primeval innocence.

The shooting of Lennie, as well as the earlier death of Curley's wife, carries with it the end of the labourers' dream of owning land.

Another reason why the sought Eden is irretrievably lost is the power of fate characters. Indeed, George “cannot control fate, any more than he could control Lennie. What he can control is the manner of Lennie’s death.” Peter Lisca believes that this slight power of the protagonists’ free will is the thing through which the author achieves balance with the force of circumstances.

Viewed in the light of its mythic and allegorical implications, the novel is the story about the nature of man’s fate in a fallen world. With the farm as an image or metaphor for heaven, the failure to achieve the dream farm is most likely associated with the question of man’s failure to attain heaven. The story suggests the futility of human attempt to recapture Eden, although the characters dedicate themselves to the elusive grail of fellowship. Lisca summarizes the pointlessness of the dream itself since there are only illusions of Edens in Steinbeck’s writing. Moreover, “in the fallen world of the Salinas Valley the Promised Land is an illusory and painful dream.”

Conclusion

**Of Mice and Men** is one of Steinbeck’s novels that end with a tragic note of pessimism. Though the characters have kept a positive drive towards alleviating their harsh life conditions with the help of a microcosmic idealistic vision of how their life on their own small piece of land or farm will be, they never reap any fruits in the end. They come to discover that their reality as helpless drifting workers never matches with the essence of their dreams as landowners or with the quality of life they do seek.

George and the other co-workers are practical in the sense that their feeling of dissatisfaction with their life yields or results in not only a dream of change but also in their strong impulse or enthusiasm for action. What they fail to realize is the futility of looking for an Edenic existence in an evil environment, and the inevitability of the defeat of any plan set for the realization of such a dream.

Notes


6 Frohock, p. 125.


11 Ibid, p. 62


13 Watt, pp. 59-60.


15 Jeffrey D. Schultz and Luchen Li, p. 147.

16 Ibid, p. 146.

17 Watt, p. 59.


19 Watt, p. 61.


21 Levant, p. 140.

22 Watt, pp. 60-61.

23 Levant, p. 135.

24 McCarthy, p. 60.

25 Levant, p. 142.

26 Goldhurst, p. 57.

27 Levant, p. 135.

28 Watt, p. 61.


Hadella, pp. 70-72.

David K. Matthews, p. 83.

Ibid, p. 83.

Jeffrey D. Schultz and Luchen Li, p. 147.


David K. Matthews, p. 85.

Jeffrey D. Schultz and Luchen Li, p. 147.

Lisca, p. 72.

Goldhurst, pp. 52-60.


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