Futile dreams and stagnation: politics in Of Mice and Men

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Albert Bierstadt's 'Mount Corcoran' (1878), an enormous, romantic vision of the Sierra Nevada, is perhaps the most well-known painting of the Californian landscape. In the background, golden foothills lead away from the green pool up to a dreamy profusion of heavenly clouds. In the foreground, by contrast, we are offered precise, realistic details: a clutch of trees, one fallen trunk in the river, perhaps the debris of the winter's flooding. A solitary bear, dwarfed by the sweeping, dramatic landscape, comes to test the water.

A predatory world

Steinbeck opens Of Mice and Men with a similar set of symbols. Lennie Small is described as a bear, huge and strong yet somehow insignificant when framed against such an imposing landscape. His green pool is a stagnant Soledad (the ranch on which he and his friend George find work) and the ripples he causes there come back to him. His progression from killing mouse to dog to woman ends predictably in his own death. At the end, Lennie gazes longingly at the Gabilan mountains and George sends him to that heaven with a gun.

Steinbeck marks the near side of his river with images of hell and decay. Animals balance the need to drink with the need to avoid predators. In the river itself, there is suggestive activity. A carp tries to come up for air but is drawn mysteriously back down into the dark water. A heron waits in the shadows. Later, its head lances down, plucks out and swallows a water snake.

This symbolic scene lets the reader know what to expect. Events in the river will be mirrored by events on the ranch. For example, when Curley's wife meets her fate, a four-taloned Jackson fork is suspended above her, and her body flops 'like a fish'. The message is clear: ranch life will be a lonely experience, as the word Soledad suggests. Men live like animals, in a pecking order, struggling for survival, growing old and weak, helpless individuals in a predatory world which will determine their fate. The only escape from this bleak predicament is to a land of dreams.

Hard times

Films of Of Mice and Men rarely do justice to Steinbeck's depiction of the bleak existence endured by migrant ranch hands. Sanitised for the average American cinema audience, the story usually becomes a trite tale of strong friendship in the face of mild adversity. The most recent Hollywood offering ends with Gary Sinise and John Malkovich as George and Lennie strolling together through golden fields in a celebration of the spiritual benefits of working the land. Throughout, the characters have worn stylish clothing which changes in each scene. It would be hard to imagine a greater distortion of the ranch hand's experience.

These were hard times. In the middle of the Great Depression, the influx of a million migrants into California from the Dustbowl states had made labour even cheaper, and competition for jobs was fierce. The wealthy landowners could pick and choose a workforce, and offer low wages, because the ranch hands were in no position to complain. Indeed, George and Lennie would be thankful for the work when most Oklahoma migrants, like the Joad family in The Grapes of Wrath, were utterly destitute and enduring barbaric conditions and oppression in overcrowded camps. Even local ranch hands like George and Lennie lived in very basic accommodation with only the barest essentials. They worked all day in the hot sun until their skin was almost black. Utterly dependent on the boss for their welfare and sustenance, they could be 'canned' at any moment. With low pay and no security, they could not make long-term plans, and could not afford to start families. All the ranch workers in the novel remain single, wasting what little money they can set aside in the local 'cathouse'. In the context of this social and economic background, their dreams of living 'off the fatta the lan' are both psychologically necessary and ludicrously far-fetched.

Powerlessness and the will to power

The best laid schemes o' mice and men

Gang aft agley

And lea'e us nought but grief and pain

For promised joy.

The novel's title, taken from Robert Burns's poem 'To a Mouse' (1785), invites the reader to make comparisons with the plight of the tenant farmers in Scotland in the late eighteenth century. In the poem, the tenant farmer, dependent on an absentee landlord for food and shelter and knowing he could be evicted on the instant, feels as powerless as the mouse whose house his plough has accidentally overturned. Higher rents, consolidation of farms and the introduction of large-scale commercial sheep farming to a struggling economy made the tenant farmer's position impossible and culminated in mass migration following the Highland Clearances. Steinbeck carries the same metaphor to his novel, where the mouse is a cipher for the powerless ranch hand, trapped in the pocket of a man who has no control over his own power and who cannot help but crush him.

Inescapable hierarchies

Though Burns's poem may be read as a cry for revolution, it is difficult to read Of Mice and Men in the same way, for its power structures are not offered as something dispensable. At no point are we invited to believe that the brutal hierarchy could be replaced with a communist utopia and all would be well. The colour red is presented as an attractive but dangerous, and ultimately fatal, temptation. Of Mice and Men is no crude polemic, advocating a communist ideal. Instead, the divisions of power seem ingrained. The characters are realistic precisely because each is driven by his own will to power. Slim's authority, Carlson's brutality, Lennie's strength, Curley's posturing--each character has his own means of trying to gain influence over others. This is specifically rendered in the description of each character's hands: the temple dancer, the stick-like wrist, the bear paws, the glove fulla Vaseline.

Those who fail to achieve any influence restore their self-esteem in their imagination: in their dreams they are powerful. Thus the alternative societies offered in the text, such as Lennie and George's dream of owning a ranch, are just as hierarchical as the Soledad ranch. Even the weak characters in the pecking order inherit the brutality of the regime they have had to endure. Crooks's face lights up with pleasure in his torture of Lennie, and Candy pauses in relish of the memory of Smitty almost beating Crooks to death.

The divisions of power are permanent and meticulously observed. Characters only enter and leave the room in the order of status, a status defined by the cards which George turns in his endless game of solitaire. Each scene records the struggle and failure of each character to change that status. Curley challenges Lennie only to have his hand crushed; Crooks stands up to Curley's wife only to retreat into the 'terrible protective dignity of the negro' when he is told she could have him 'strung up so easy it aint funny'.

The rigidity of the existing hierarchy is reinforced by the ideology of the ranch hands themselves. The Western magazines that they 'secretly believe' contain tales of solitary individuals somehow capable of extraordinary feats of skill which set them apart from their fellow men. Slim is initially presented to us as the embodiment of this fantasy, an archetypal cowboy capable of 'killing a fly on the wheeler's butt without touching the mule', although we are later allowed to see through the facade: we note, for example, his shaking hands when he fails to intervene in the killing of Candy's dog.

The Western magazines show the ranch hands a world of gunmanship, posses and retributive justice. However, this culture is applied on the ranch by characters struggling to satisfy their will to power, and what emerges is not justice but a vengeful brutality. Curley's wife threatens to have Crooks lynched, Carlson shoots Candy's dog merely because of its smell, and Curley hunts Lennie down not to achieve justice for the killing of his wife but because Lennie has crushed his hand.

A glimpse of a better world

The harsh economic conditions and the self-centred application of Western magazine culture combine to create a world which discriminates for disability, gender and race. The disabled characters like Candy become old and useless with no place to go and no future. Women are treated as prostitutes. Curley's wife is denied the dignity of a name, and is described as a tart and a lulu, the same name given to Slim's dog. The negro Crooks is housed with the animals, and suffers in abject loneliness. The ranch his father owned has long ago been taken away, and the mauled copy of the California Civil Code of 1905 on his shelf suggests many vain years of trying to recover it.

Yet at the edges of this desperate gloom, Steinbeck allows us glimpses of a better world. The ranch hands play a horseshoe game in which Crooks is allowed to participate, and the contrived puns on stake and tenement here suggest the possibility of holding property in common. George has progressed from an attitude in the past in Sacramento when he exploited and ridiculed Lennie to a parental role in which he now cares for him. The novel closes with a distinction between those like Carlson and Curley who will never understand the emotions and needs of others, and those like George and Slim who are capable of understanding and forming friendships but who have to cope with a society so sickened by the struggle to survive that they are forced into mercy killing. Thus the glimmer of hope for a better world is violently extinguished.

Of Mice and Men argues that the gulf between the gritty struggle for survival and the ideal dream life can never be bridged, except in death. While Steinbeck exposes the inequalities in society and encourages the reader to sympathise with the plight of poor migrant workers, his depiction of the inherent will to power in human nature shows us that attempts to change the social system will be futile. As the opening scene reminds us, men are trapped in a set of relations which work like fate. Americans will continue to dream, like Martin Luther King, that the nation will live out the true meaning of its creed, that all men are created equal. But for Steinbeck the American Dream of self-sufficiency and living off the fat of the land, premised as it is on a gun culture which involves brutality and the exploitation of the weak, is doomed to failure. The magnitude of this failure is recorded by the extent to which Lennie, a cipher for America, is denied life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Further reading

Proulx, A. (1992) Postcards, Scribner.

Slater, J. F. (1974) 'Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men' in T. Hayashi (ed.) A Study Guide to Steinbeck, Scarecrow Press.

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**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)

Reith, Duncan. "Futile dreams and stagnation: politics in Of Mice and Men: the American novelist John Steinbeck has sometimes been criticised as a sentimentalist. Duncan Reith uncovers the bleak political pessimism behind his novel of ranch life during the Great Depression, Of Mice and Men." *The English Review* 15.2 (2004): 6+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 12 May 2014.