

Dream and Friendship
in
Of Mice and Men

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Of Mice and Men (1937) has two main problems; one is what the dream is, and another is what the friendship is. This novel seems pessimistic when it is looked only on the surface, but is it really so? What kind of thought does Steinbeck include in it, actually?

Firstly, I would like to see how the author think of the dreams in the novel. George and Lennie have a dream, and they talk about it again and again. The readers easily know that, because George tells Lennie how they will live very fluently as if he tells some fairy tales. And Lennie, who cannot remember anything, remembers only how he will take care of the rabbits completely.

Then, what kind of dream do George and Lennie have? The description about their dream appears three times in the novel.

First, in Chapter One, George and Lennie talk about it before supper by the Salinas River. After making sure that they are not alone like the other working men, because they can help each other, they describe about the small house, the vegetable patches, the rabbits, the chickens, and the stove rather simply.

The remarkable point here is that their dream is very small in the ordinary working men's eyes. The whole things

that George and Lennie desperately want are "just a little house and a couple of acres"¹. They just want to live with the several animals including the rabbits which Lennie is supposed to look after. It seems funny because they think that they "live off the fatta the lan"² talking about such a small dream.

Then, why does this dream mean so much for them? Lennie has the key to the answer; he cannot remember anything except the rabbits, and he does not understand what is good and what is bad in the society. Besides, the fact that he is a very big man and has much power is unfortunate, too. For, because of these qualities, Lennie often causes troubles to others, even though he never means them. Lennie is not a bad man but an innocent man just like a child, but nobody understands that. As a result, George often has to run away taking Lennie with him. In fact, Of Mice and Men starts from the scene in which they ran away from Weed where they had worked previously.

Like this, they cannot settle in one place, but have to keep on moving being chased by someone. They must be under great tension all the time; especially George's care must be very heavy, because it is he that defends Lennie against the enemies.

Taking this into consideration, what is the dream that

they want to make come true? Perhaps, it is the peaceful life. Since they are usually pursued by someone, they wish to settle in one place and live a quiet life. The happiest life for them is the life that nobody disturbs or blames. It does not matter how small their land is or how few their properties are. They will be satisfied if only they can live an ordinary life. In other words, they do not expect any special life, but just want to do the common things in the common way.

Although their dream is unlikely to be realized at the beginning, it gets realistic more and more, as the story goes on. The second scene in which George and Lennie talk about their dream appears in Chapter Three. Here, it becomes much more concrete than that in Chapter One. They plan what kind of house they will live in, how they will cook the things which they harvest from the farm, and of course how Lennie will look after the rabbits. These descriptions are so detailed that it is very easy for the readers to imagine the scene. This results from the scene of their imaginary life that they picture to themselves.

Also, Candy takes part in their plan in this scene. He is an old man who lost his hand on the ranch four years ago, and works as a swamper now. Since he offers to pay most part of

the money, three hundred and fifty dollars, George and Lennie come to feel that they can achieve their dream of living peacefully. Even though they thought that it was only a dream and that they could never make it come true at first, it gets realistic now. As a result, "they all bemused by the beauty of the thing, each mind was popped into the future when this lovely thing should come about"³.

However, an obstacle stands in their way when they feel that they can almost realize their dream, for Lennie causes another problem. And this time, the matter is very serious, because he finally kills Curley's wife, even though he does not mean it. George, being afraid that Curley and the other working men will lynch or lock up Lennie, concludes to shoot Lennie.

The third scene in which George and Lennie talk about their dream appears in Chapter Six, which is before Lennie's death. George knows that he cannot protect Lennie any more; soon or later, Lennie will be found out, then he will be ill-treated, and worse, he may be killed. Since George accepts Lennie as a man and as his precious friend, he cannot bear to see that the cold-blooded people will treat Lennie cruelly. Therefore, he decides to kill Lennie by himself.

It must be heartbreaking for George to do that, but he is very kind to Lennie till the last moment. That is, he tells Lennie about their dream again. Even though his story now gets more groundless than that of before, he tells him the most favorite parts: that they are not alone like the other working men, because they have each other to take care of, and that they will "live on the fatta the land"⁴. Of course, he does not forget to tell him about the rabbits. He talks as if a father tells his son a fairy tale.

The dialogues right before George shoots Lennie are as follows:

"Go on, George. When we gonna do it?"

"Gonna do it soon."

"Me an' you."

"You . . . an' me. . . ."

Lennie begged, "Le's do it now. Le's get that place now."

"Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta."⁵

George's thought and decision can be seen here. He does not betray Lennie till the last moment, but that means that he has to kill him before it is too late. It is very ironical that killing Lennie is the kindest way for George.

George and Lennie has cherished the same dream for a long time, but finally Lennie dies, and George becomes alone. Their dream is too vain to be realized.

Like this, the theme of this novel is that the dream vanishes in vain, and it corresponds with the title; Of Mice and Men is the quotation from Burns's poem:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
for promis'd joy.⁶

In the case of George and Lennie, they have a dream at first, and they come to think that they can realize it little by little. However, when they almost set to work, their plan gets frustrated. That is, Lennie is shot to death because of killing Curley's wife, and George becomes alone; their dream is totally destroyed.

This seems the most tragic ending if the readers look at only the surface of the story. However, once they look closer, they will recognize that they cannot affirm it definitely. For, Lennie must feel happy when he is shot; he dies picturing

the dream which he and George are supposed to realize. Moreover, they make sure how deep their ties of friendship are. Lennie must be calm and glad having George right next to him and feel no fears. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the happiest way for Lennie to die like this, even though it is the painful ending for George.

George and Lennie's dream is originally to live on their own land without being troubled by anybody. This may be quite natural and not be special for the ordinary people, but for the two, the calm life is the most extravagant. Taking it into consideration, they do not have to run away any more, since Lennie is dead and do not cause another problem. They become free finally; they make a part of their dream come true ironically.

The most remarkable point here is in the depth of the friendship between George and Lennie. Their ties are so firm that nobody can squeeze himself into them. Furthermore, nobody can take the place of George or that of Lennie.

This is evident from the dialogues between George and Candy; when they see Curley's wife is dead, they become aware of the seriousness of the matter. The murder which Lennie committed means that their dream is destroyed completely, even

though they are almost ready as to the fund. Candy, who is so anxious for the new life, suggests George to enforce their plan without Lennie, but George never says yes:

Now Candy spoke his greatest fear. "You an' me can get the little place an' live nice, can't we, George?"

George said softly, "---I think I knowed we'd never do her. . . ."

"Then, it's all off?" Candy asked sulkily.

George didn't answer his question.⁷

George cannot make the dream come true without Lennie from the beginning; Lennie is a special man for George, and Candy can never take the place of him.

It is not too much to say that George can hold the dream because he has Lennie. As a matter of fact, he tells Candy that "He (Lennie) usta like to hear about it (the dream) so much I got to thinking maybe we would."⁸ Lennie is not a troublemaker but a precious friend for George.

If George really thinks that Lennie is burdensome, he can desert Lennie, or he can cheat Lennie out of his money any time. However, he does not do so, and instead, he usually cares for and protects him. This is not only because he feels responsible for Lennie, but also because he likes him and needs

him. George and Lennie are the very good partners who care for each other; just like Lennie needs George, George needs Lennie, too.

Here is the good example to show that their relation is just even:

George went on. . . . "We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. . . ."

Lennie broke in. "I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you. . . ." He laughed delightedly.⁹

However, their friendship is very rare at that time, for nobody has any margin for taking care of others. Ordinary working men think only of themselves and just live day after day without planning the future. Moreover, since they do not trust anybody, they are all alone.

Candy is not the exception, too; he is lonely and feels sad all the time, because nobody takes him as a friend, and worse, nobody treats him as a mere worker since he lost his hand.

Taking that into consideration, what is Candy's dream? It must be to have a companion; he wants to keep company with somebody evenly. Even though he has to pay much money or

somebody dies around him to achieve his dream, it does not much matter, for the most important thing for him is to have somebody next to him. In other words, he desperately wants to communicate with others so much.

What ordinary working men want most at that time is a friend. They even think if they have somebody to talk to, they do not care whether he is listening to them or not; they are satisfied if only they can be not alone. Perhaps, it is no exaggeration to say that they have the fear of loneliness much more than that of pennilessness.

On the contrary, George and Lennie have each other to look after. They accomplish the dream that any other man hardly obtains. So it is remarkable that they surpass the others in that point.

As mentioned above, John Steinbeck writes how vain one's dream is, but it is not everything that he focuses on; he also writes how precious the friendship is. Even though George and Lennie fail to realize their dream, they get the glorious ties of friendship. Therefore, the author must feel respect and sympathy for them. As a matter of fact, he says that "And in hopelessness--George is able to rise to greatness--to kill his friend to save him. George is a hero and only heroes are worth

writing about."¹⁰ These words just hold true in the case of George and Lennie.

In general, it is very difficult for one to obtain the thing which one wants most; the dream is destroyed completely, or he has to sacrifice his precious thing to gain it. Still, he has a chance to be a hero. George can be a hero because he never betrays Lennie till the last moment, and Lennie can be a hero, too, because he makes George hold the dream in his purity and innocence.

Therefore, Of Mice and Men is not the hopeless tragedy of George and Lennie, but there are some elements that give the readers the gleam of hope. John Steinbeck does not end the story in only a pessimistic way. His affirmative thought for men can be seen slightly here.

Notes

¹ John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p.14.

² Ibid., p.14.

³ Ibid., p.60.

⁴ Ibid., p.105.

⁵ Ibid., p.106.

⁶ Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958) p.139.

⁷ John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) pp.94-95.

⁸ Ibid., p.94.

⁹ Ibid., p.14.

¹⁰ Elaine A. Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, Steinbeck: A Life in Letters (New York: The Viking Press, 1975) p.563.