

John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

***Of Mice and Men* (1937)**

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The second section of the American Declaration of Independence (4th July, 1776) begins:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In 1862, the Homestead Act enshrined in American law the right of any citizen over the age of 21 to ownership of 160 acres of land, provided that a filing fee of \$10 was paid and the land was occupied for 10 years and a crop raised on it: from that time, the constitutional 'pursuit of Happiness' became equated with a man's ownership of his own 'little bit of land'/'a little piece of land'/'a little stake'.

It is in response to this cultural/social development that, in 1931, J. T. Adams wrote *The Epic of America*, a book which is famous for a phrase italicised and then defined in its Epilogue:

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.

It is in this context that Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* in 1936 (published February 1937).

Steinbeck's title, of course, is derived from Robert Burns' poem 'To A Mouse' (1785). Burns, a ploughman, had disturbed the nest in which a timid mouse was hibernating. In Ayrshire dialect, he reflects upon the unfortunate lot of his 'poor, earth-born companion an' fellow mortal'. He pities all such creatures and reflects memorably upon the way in which

things have a habit of turning out for them:

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promised joy!"

The mouse is not alone in discovering that its 'best-laid plans' for the future are in vain.

In Steinbeck's short novel, the plans of George Milton and Lennie Small also go awry.

To give point to this cursed course of events, Steinbeck presents the relationship between Lennie and mice: he intends to take care of them, but ends up killing them ('besides, you've broke it pettin' it'). Running parallel with this ironic course of events is George's relationship with Lennie: he intends to take care of him, but ends up killing him ('He pulled the trigger').

George Milton and Lennie Small are different from other itinerant workers ('bindle-bums') in that they have made plans for the future: 'We got a future.' The 'best-laid plans' of these men are to save up enough money to purchase a small-holding [= 'a little house and a couple of acres'/their 'own little place'] and then subsist off it. From Chapter One, there are increasingly obvious signs that these Californian dreamers will be disappointed. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck makes a prolific use of prolepsis: that is, an accurate foreshadowing of events to come/a flash-forwarding to later events/a direct anticipation of the future. There are no fewer than 20 proleptic ironies, all—virtually by definition—to be found in the first three of the six chapters. In this tragic story, there are two human deaths: one accidental, one intentional. Steinbeck flags up both deaths repeatedly and vigorously.

The **first** set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Lennie's fascination with tactile sensations. Most ominously, Lennie Small is King Midas in reverse: that is, every living thing he touches turns to carrion. Whether his pet is a mouse ('Jus' a dead mouse, George') or a puppy, his affectionate fondling of it has a sad and unintended consequence: he literally kills it with his cumbersome kindness. Quickly, we learn that Lennie's lack of self-awareness has already and only recently got him into big trouble:

Jus' wanted to feel that little girl's dress—jus' wanted to pet

it like it was a mouse—Well, how the hell did she know you jus' wanted to feel her dress? (p 29)

Well, he seen this girl in a red dress. Dumb bastard like he is, he wants to touch ever'thing he likes. Just wants to feel it. So he reaches out to feel this red dress an' the girl lets out a squawk... (p 67)

The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie. (p 68)

He jus' wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time. (p 68)

Steinbeck signposts the direction in which the story is heading. His signposting is not subtle: Lennie ('strong as a bull') is attracted by the red rag of the dress; because he cannot make academic distinctions, he treats the cotton fabric as if it is mouse fur; the 'trouble with mice is you always kill 'em' (p 31). Consequently, George's adverb ('always') predicts that, no different from a mouse or a puppy, any girl in red clothing is in mortal danger: 'You'll kill him, the first thing you know' (p 69). Lennie ('a nice fella', 'a nice guy') is a tragic figure: in him, physical effectiveness and mental defectiveness form a fatal combination.

Ironically named, Lennie Small ('such a strong guy') is an *ungentle* giant; he means no harm, but tragically does not know his own strength: 'I wasn't doin' nothing bad.' It is central to the plot that Lennie should be physically strong and mentally weak. In the vocabulary of 1937, Lennie ('a huge man, shapeless of face') is an imbecile – a condition for which Steinbeck substitutes the colloquial epithets 'crazy bastard', 'poor bastard', 'crazy fool', 'dumb bastard', 'crazy son-of-a-bitch' and 'a god-damn nuisance'. In 1937, the clinical terms for Lennie's condition were explicit and even less friendly: at the time, he would have been classified as 'educationally sub-normal' (ESN) or 'mentally defective' or 'mentally retarded'; at the time, 'not bright' was a euphemistic way to refer to his 'arrested development' or 'retarded development'. Political correctness requires that today we say that Lennie ('dumb as hell', 'a dum-dum') is suffering from a learning disability; he is intellectually challenged and certainly has an IQ lower than 50. Fatally, he is without the capacity to assess the impact of his physique upon others around him; in any language, he is a danger both to others and to himself [= in George's words, 'too dumb to take care of 'imself'].

Lennie's powers of concentration and recollection are extremely limited: indeed, it seems that 'rabbits'—a subject which he brings up no fewer than 25 times—are the only things on his mind. In one respect, Lennie's obsession with rabbits ('An' rabbits') is an index of his mental incapacity; in another respect, it reinforces the main theme of the novel: namely, every American's quest for his 'own little place' [= his own idea of 'heaven'] on which he can grow crops and keep animals. 'Seems like ever' guy got land in his head,' says Crooks, thereby endorsing this theme (p 108).

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck's aim is to offer a criticism of the American Dream. He aims to show that this Dream, if not altogether an illusion, is inherently difficult to realise. George Milton's dream that he and Lennie Small will one day 'live off the fat of the land' is a Biblical dream of plenty.¹ The grand ambition which they share—to '*live off the fatta the lan*'—is expressed five times and runs through the narrative like a chorus. At the same time, it is touchingly modest: first, it is for only 'a couple of acres' (p 32); then it expands, but only to 'ten acres' (p 84). They do not have great expectations: on the contrary, ten features of this domestic paradise—'a little win'mill', 'a little shack', 'a few berries', 'a few hutches', 'a few pigs', 'a little whisky', 'a few eggs', 'a little house', a 'little fat iron stove', 'a few pigeons'—are diminutives. They would be thankful for small mercies. When it seems that, with Candy's help, they will finally be able to afford this small-holding, they fall silent in amazement: 'This thing they had never really believed in was coming true' (p 87). Sadly, Steinbeck's aim is to show that, in mid-century America, even these 'little' goals remain unattainable for 'small' men: '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,' says Crooks scornfully (p 106). It is by showing how 'little' such men can achieve that Steinbeck makes his criticism of the state of the Union.

For the purposes of the plot, Curley's Wife, possibly no older than 16, is presented as a traditional 'floosy': although she may not walk the streets, she certainly walks the ranch in search of male admiration. She knows that she is 'purty' and speaks 'playfully': 'Nobody can't blame a person for lookin'' (p 53). She is a flamboyant attention-seeker in whom 'the ache for attention' cannot be subdued: 'Seems like she can't keep away from guys' (p 78). She is never named because she is simply an agent of the plot; her sole function is to simmer ('I get awful lonely') in a seductive way: p 122. Although she is Curley's wife, of only two weeks, she is stereotypically coquettish and flirtatious. She knows that she is sexually attractive ('purty') and is especially promiscuous with her glances: that is, she gives men 'the eye' and flaunts her young body in a cotton dress

(‘You’ll see plenty.’) Steinbeck’s nine epithets for her (‘a tart’, ‘a tramp’, a ‘piece of jail-bait’, ‘a rat-trap’, ‘a looloo’, ‘floosy’, ‘that bitch’, ‘god-damn tramp’ and ‘lousy tart’) strongly suggest that her brazen coquettishness represents an exhibition of hubris—which inevitably invites its nemesis in the great barn.

For Curley’s Wife, the model is most probably Jean Harlow (1911-1937). Aged 16, Harlean Carpenter (as she then was) got married to the boss’s son; in 1930/1931, she broke into films (*Hell’s Angels/Platinum Blonde*) and became one of Hollywood’s first icons/first sex symbols. From her references to ‘pitchers’ and ‘shows’, it is clear that Curley’s Wife also sees herself as a ‘Blonde Bombshell’ (a sobriquet for Harlow²) whom movie stardom in Hollywood awaits. Like Jean Harlow’s, her voice too has ‘a nasal, brittle quality’ (p 53).

Curley’s Wife has amorous and glamorous ideas above her station and poses ostentatiously: ‘she smiled archly and twitched her body’/she ‘put her hands on her hips’ (p 53/p 110). She has a roving eye; her looks are arch in that they have designs on the ranch-hands. Fortunately, Candy has the measure of her and tells her to go away, using an image—‘roll your hoop’—which implies that, though pretty and nubile, she is barely old enough to be out of the schoolyard.

Consistently, Steinbeck’s sartorial imagery suggests that Curley’s Wife is a scarlet woman: ‘She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up’ (p 53). Furthermore, ‘her finger-nails were red’; so, too, were her ‘mules’ [= backless shoes] on which there were ‘little bouquets of red ostrich feathers’. Ominously, she is an identikit picture of the girl in the red dress whom Lennie had molested in Weed

When Curley’s Wife re-appears in the barn, she is literally dressed to be killed: ‘She wore her bright cotton dress and the mules with the red ostrich feathers’ (p 122). Given his tactile nature, it is inevitable that Lennie will want to touch her cotton frock and that he will certainly welcome her invitation to feel her ‘soft and fine’ hair: ‘Here—feel right here’ (p 127). It is a measure of her vanity that Curley’s Wife then panics not because Lennie’s big fingers are assaulting her, but because they are messing up her hair-do: ‘You stop it now, you’ll mess it all up’ (p 127). Ironically, it is her vain struggling and writhing that leads to her death.

It is at the end of *Vanity Fair* (1847) that William Thackeray writes that ‘he can close up the box’ and ‘put the puppets away’. Likewise, Steinbeck is an adroit puppeteer. Like the Victorian novelist, he manipulates his characters to meet the demands of his plot. His **second** set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Curley, the son of the ranch-owner. Curley is

'pugnacious'/'pretty handy': in fact, he is 'a lightweight' boxer so adept with his fists that he has even enjoyed successes 'in the ring'. For the purposes of the plot, Curley is a stereotypical 'little guy': he 'hates big guys' and is always spoiling for a fight 'with big guys' (p 48). Worse, this 'son-of-a-bitch', this 'mean little guy', is newly married to his very young wife who wears a flimsy dress, paints her lips/nails red, does her hair 'in little rolled clusters' and makes eyes at men.

Curley's fight with Lennie is quite deliberately fixed: 'The next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a line, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie's big hand' (p 91). Steinbeck fixes Curley to Lennie's line: if not like a fish, then Curley could easily be described as 'flopping' like a rag doll, like a puppet. Nor is Steinbeck finished with this verb, for it has a forward-looking [= proleptic] effect of its own:

'Don't you go yellin',' he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck.

As signalled, the history of Weed has repeated itself. Significantly, Curley's flighty wife is described as both a floppy puppet and a hooked fish.

The **third** set of prolepses/proleptic ironies involves Candy's 'grizzled', old sheep-dog.

In Chapter Three, Steinbeck constructs a long section of dialogue between Candy and Slim in which Slim argues that the 'ancient dog' should be put down³ (pp. 71/72). He sets out three arguments for euthanasia:

first, that the blind and crippled dog can no longer enjoy a decent quality of life ('An' he ain't no good to himself/'That dog ain't no good to himself');

second, that a clinical shot to the head ('Shoot him right in the back of the head why, he'd never know what hit him') will be immediate and painless;

and third, that it is cruel to let the dog go on living in such rheumatic pain ('Well, you ain't being kind to him keeping him alive') and that it would therefore be 'kind'/merciful to 'put the old devil out of his misery.'

Slim reiterates that a swift end to such an existence will be absolutely

painless: 'It won't hurt him none at all'/'He won't even feel it.' Afterwards, Candy—'I ought to of shot that dog myself, George'—regrets that he did not take responsibility for shooting his old dog himself (p 89).

It emerges that this conversation, to which George listens, has been crafted to foreshadow the hours after it becomes clear that Lennie has inadvertently killed Curley's Wife. It looks forward darkly to the time when Curley's posse, intent on a grisly revenge, goes after Lennie and it rehearses George's arguments for shooting Lennie before a mob of scary strangers has a chance to hang him up or gun him down. Candy's subsequent regret—that he did not shoot his own dog—supplies George with his ultimate justification for shooting Lennie himself.

George is an altruist: as a result, he keeps up an unselfish concern for Lennie's welfare.

For Lennie, his 'poor earth-born companion and fellow mortal', a very vulnerable individual, not quite right in the head, he has nothing but compassion. Because Lennie has the mental age of a child and cannot look after himself, George ('Poor bastard') pities him. It is plain that he has taken it upon himself to take care of Lennie; he has done so out of the goodness of his heart and at a personal cost to himself: 'I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail.' George behaves 'morosely' (x3) because he knows that, without Lennie, he could have a better quality of life: 'I could live so easy and maybe have a girl' (p 24). Rather than make do with an occasional visit to a cat-house, such as Old Suzy's brothel, he could perhaps settle down with a wife....

To the surprise of his fellow labourers, George remains totally loyal to his travelling companion; he allows no let-up in his grim determination to stand by his vulnerable friend. More than once, a ranch-hand queries this altruistic devotion: 'Well, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy' (p 43)/ 'Ain't many guys travel around together' (p 57)/ 'I hardly never seen two guys travel together' (p 65). Such sceptical tones express the false suspicion that George and Lennie's relationship is 'funny': that is, homosexual (p 65). Although Steinbeck does not employ the word 'love', a personal response to the text might justifiably conclude that George loves Lennie as a might can love a child ('a big baby').

The ultimate test of George's loyalty to/love for Lennie comes after Lennie accidentally kills Curley's Wife. George ('Lennie never done it in meanness') knows that Lennie is guilty not of homicide, but of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility; he knows that there was no malice aforethought. He knows too that such an argument would be too sophisticated for Curley and that Lennie can expect only the

rough justice of the Wild West. Ever since his hubristic pride in his pugilistic prowess met its nemesis in Lennie's vice-like grip, Curley has had a powerful motive for getting even with him. By his emotive language, Curley ('I'm gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself') signals that he will not be taking any extenuating circumstances into account; to him, it does not matter that Lennie is 'nuts' [= mentally handicapped]. It is therefore to pre-empt Curley's gory revenge that George, recollecting Candy's regret, takes responsibility for ending Lennie's life in a humane way; compassionately, he acknowledges that this responsibility is his. George's killing of Lennie is a mercy-killing in that it puts the 'poor bastard' out of his misery: that is, it releases him from the difficulty of living a handicapped life. In Chapter One, George had thought of 'the swell time' which he could have without Lennie and he complained: 'I never get no peace' (p 30). To George, Lennie proves burdensome and is a continual worry; at the same time, there is no sense at the end of the book that Lennie's death is an equally blessed/welcome release for him. Rather, killing Lennie is presented as something which George 'had to' do for his handicapped companion's own good: 'You hadda, George. I swear you hadda,' says Slim in a sensitive effort to console him/comfort him (p 148). In the final analysis, George is a good man.

At the end, George absolves Lennie of blame for his lethal actions ('I never been mad, an' I ain't now') and induces in him a peaceful state of mind. Steinbeck uses Biblical imagery to suggest that Lennie is sent to his death with a feeling of fulfilment. In order to complete their difficult journey out of Egypt, the Israelites had to cross the River Jordan: on the far bank of this river, there lies the Promised Land. For this reason, George, before he kills Lennie, points twice to 'a little place' on the other side of the river: 'Look down there across the river, like you can almost see the place' (pp 146/147). Finally, George is directing Lennie's attention to the land which he had promised him, the patch of fat land on which he can rear his rabbits; in Burns' phrase, it is a 'promised joy'. We are invited to imagine that Lennie, when he dies, goes straight to this tranquil 'heaven' and experiences that 'joy'.

One of Crooks' functions is to be pessimistic/sceptical about the possibility of realising the American Dream:

'I never seen a guy really do it ... I seen guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever' time a whore-house or a blackjack game took what it takes' (p 109).

In the end, it is George's lot to share this pessimism: 'I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her' (p 131). Consequently, Candy's reproachful words over the body of Curley's Wife—'You ain't no good now, you lousy tart ...I could of hoed in the garden and washed dishes for them guys'—form a requiem for the American Dream. Like George and Lennie, Candy was desperate to escape his lowly circumstances and was inspired by 'the beauty of the thing': that is, by the homely/humble simplicity of an independent existence. In *Of Mice and Men*, 'this lovely thing' (p 88) is presented as being frustratingly and stubbornly out of reach.

References

1. It is in ***Genesis*** (Chapter 45 Verse 18) that the Pharaoh originally promises Joseph that he 'shall eat the fat of the land'.
2. Harlow: a surname in which the t is silent.
3. Candy's old dog is a symbolic underdog: that is, it keeps working till it reaches the point at which it is fit only to be taken out and shot.

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