

The Historical Ideas explored in *Of Mice and Men*

John Steinbeck's Life

Steinbeck was born in Salinas, his father owned a grain store which went bankrupt.

In 1936 Steinbeck published *In Dubious Battle* – a story that divided opinion. Some said that it defended labourers too much – and was almost Communist. On the other hand, other readers claimed that it showed the labourers to be vicious and lazy.

Before publishing *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, John Steinbeck wrote a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* on the lives of farmers. He toured the Southwest Dustbowl and was shocked at the poverty of the migrant workers (like George and Lennie).

Some readers believed that Steinbeck deliberately exaggerated the poverty in order to make a political point.

Eleanor Roosevelt (the wife of the American President) was shocked at the poverty Steinbeck described. She visited the migrant workers and declared Steinbeck's portrayal to be accurate.

Steinbeck vigorously opposed political aggression in the 1930s and 40s. *Of Mice and Men* was published 2 years before the start of World War Two.

Steinbeck wrote *The Moon is Down* in 1942 – a novel criticizing the Nazi's hostility towards weaker nations. We can also see Steinbeck's opposition to force and aggression in his presentation of Curley in *Of Mice and Men*.

Race

Prejudice

Crooks is the only black man in the novel. He gives us an insight into the position of black people in America at the time.

By 1937, slavery had been abolished in the USA. However, black people did not yet have equal rights.

Crooks does not live with the other hands in the bunkroom – he is isolated in his own room in the barn. ‘They say I stink’ – this comment reminds us of Carlson’s remarks about Candy’s dog.

He has ‘deep black wrinkles’ and ‘pain-tightened lips’. He is in constant pain and treats himself as he does the horses with liniment. Steinbeck presents him as someone who has suffered because of his race.

In 1937, the word ‘nigger’ was still used as an offensive term for black people. Even white people who are not actually prejudiced, like Candy, use the word. Candy tells George, ‘Ya see the stable buck’s a nigger. Nice fella, too’.

Steinbeck uses Curley’s wife to show the brutal and unfair power of white over black:

“‘You got no rights comin’ in a colored man’s room’...

‘You keep your place, Nigger. I could get you strung up in a tree so easy it ain’t even funny’.

Crooks had reduced himself to nothing, ‘Yes, ma’am’.”

She crushes Crook’s pride shown in his use of the respectful ‘Yes, ma’am’. She also crushes Candy’s attempt to defend Crooks (an act that shows not all white people are prejudiced). This episode is especially tragic as Curley’s wife is, in other ways, as much a victim as Crooks.

Crooks is not a typical black man of the 1930s (with roots in slavery).

His family used to have quite a high status before the Great Depression.

He is still a victim of prejudice as black people were rare in this area of Soledad.

Being a victim can make you prejudiced

Crook’s reveals that he used to have white friends – however, his father disapproved of this. Steinbeck shows that, in the 1930s, racial prejudice could sometimes work both ways.

He ‘scowls’ when Lennie intrudes. He is very defensive. Steinbeck shows that Crooks can be quite vindictive. He upsets Lennie by suggesting that George has abandoned him. His ‘face lighted with pleasure in his tortures’. Steinbeck may be suggesting that, if a society abuses and victimizes people – the abuse can make those victims cruel themselves.

Civil Rights

In 1937, black people did have greater access to education. This increased their understanding of the unfair society they lived in.

Steinbeck shows that Crooks is literate and aware of his rights. He has 'large gold-rimmed spectacles' and a 'mauled copy of the California Civil Code for 1905'. His eyes 'glitter with intensity', suggesting that he has a sharp mind.

The prejudice Crooks has faced makes him value human companionship and understanding. He says that without friends, we 'got nothing to measure by'.

"I have a Dream"

One of Steinbeck's main images in *Of Mice and Men* is the dream of an earthly paradise or 'heaven' – in America this is often associated with freedom and owning your own farm. Religion was *very* important to black people in the USA. Freedom from oppression and inequality was often linked to Biblical ideas and events – especially those of Exodus – where Moses leads the Israelites to the 'promised land of milk and honey' (which sounds a little like the 'fatta the lan' Lennie, George and Crooks hope for).

In 1963, the black civil rights leader, The Revd. Martin Luther King declared: 'I have a dream ... that my three little children will be judged, not on the colour of their skin, but on the content of their character.' This dream would eventually come true later in the twentieth century. Martin Luther King is, in some ways, similar to Crooks – both were proud and intelligent black men. In other ways they seem very different

Crooks is very pessimistic. Martin Luther King was a Christian minister, and very religious. He believed that the day would come when all black people could get to the 'promised land' of his 'dream'.

Crooks, on the other hand, seems to sum up the opposite view in *Of Mice and Men*. Crook's tells us that 'Nobody never gets to heaven'. In 1937, when Steinbeck created the character of Crooks, freedom for a poor black man probably seemed almost impossible.

Life on the Ranch

Migrant Workers

George and Lennie are migrant workers. They don't have their own ranch, and have to move around California looking for jobs.

There is a general lack of feeling for other people – men are reduced to their physical job (they are known as 'hands'). Candy's dog is shot without emotion when it stops being useful. Life is portrayed as 'miserable'. Characters do not achieve their dreams – the best they can hope for is to be 'put out of their misery'.

Loneliness

The 1930s were a lonely time to be a migrant worker. Steinbeck explores this theme in many ways. The men work in Soledad – The word Soledad is Spanish. It means 'solitary' (isolated). It refers to Mary, Mother of Christ when she was in mourning. She was called 'Our Lady of Loneliness'. When George talks about men 'like us being the loneliest guys', Steinbeck is talking about all the migrant workers in California in the 1930s.

Hard Work

Steinbeck frequently refers to the work that the men do.

- It is hard physical labour.
- They work very long hours.
- There are injuries (like Crooks' and Candy) – the job is so hard that it is deforming or killing the men.

Gambling

Gambling is an important part of ranch life in *Of Mice and Men* – the men play cards and toss horseshoes. Poor workers in the 1930s saw gambling as a fast way of escaping poverty and relieving boredom.

Steinbeck may be suggesting that poor people were caught in a cycle of poverty and depression. They were losing, even when trying to win.

In contrast to the others, George plays solitaire (a card game for one person) – he doesn't gamble, and this allows him to save the money for the 'little plotta lan'.

Violence

The world was a violent place in 1937.

Steinbeck includes a great deal of violence in the novel. We hear about:

- Killing animals (Slim drowns the pups and Carlson kills Candy's dog)
- Fighting (Crooks has previously been attacked in the bunk house, Curley boxes)
- Lynching (Lennie and Crooks are both threatened with mob violence)

Steinbeck and his characters often mention violence casually – as if it is just another part of life. This shows just how brutal ranch life was like in 1937.

It might also shock a modern reader.

Guns

The references to guns in the novel are significant. Carlson's Luger is used to kill Candy's dog, and later, Lennie. Steinbeck also describes Crook's shotgun.

Americans have always had the right to own guns (this is illegal in the UK) – gun crime is a major problem in the USA, even today. Back in 1937, Steinbeck appears to foresee this in *Of Mice and Men*. The characters use guns as an easy solution to their problems.

The Wild West

Guns also show the reader that, even though the novel was written in 1937, California was still 'the wild west'. In the 1800s – Americans moved west to set up towns and farms. They were far away from the government in Washington. Most early settlers carried guns to defend themselves, as there were few laws in 'the wild west'. By 1937, the west was not meant to be 'wild' anymore.

In Mice and Men – Steinbeck shows that 'wild west' justice still existed in 1937.

- Crooks and Lennie are both threatened with 'lynching' (being murdered by local people).
- The men hunt Lennie like an animal – no one thinks that he should go to court and have a fair trial.
- Even George feels that his own 'wild west' justice is better than handing Lennie over to the police.

Slim sums this 'Wild West Justice' up at the end of the novel – he comforts George by telling him 'you hadda, George, I swear you hadda'. Do you think Steinbeck agrees with him? Do you?

Cowboys

Several of the ranch hands love reading 'pulp magazines' (like comic books). They especially like 'The Dark Rider'. In 1937 – romantic images of cowboys, 'Indians' and the Wild West were very common in books and films.

Life for the ranch hands is nothing like these stories –

- In cowboy stories life is exciting, on the ranch it is boring.
- In cowboy stories men are heroic, on the ranch they are cowardly and selfish.
- In cowboy stories shoot-outs are a blaze of glory, on the ranch, guns end lives.

Steinbeck may be suggesting that the men's life was grim and that their only way out was the fantasy of reading 'Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe'.

Poverty and The Great Depression

The American Stock Market crashed in 1929
Many businesses lost all of their money
Unemployment was very high – people needed jobs

The Dust Bowls

In the Mid-West of the USA, drought and failed crops created 'dust bowls' where nothing would grow.

Workers' Rights

Many Americans traveled West to California in search of work.
People moved around a lot so it was very difficult to organise their welfare through trade unions. Migrant workers did not have any power: 'Nobody'd listen to us' (Candy).
This meant that bosses could pay them low wages and treat them badly.
Steinbeck explores this theme through the character of the unsympathetic Boss in *Of Mice and Men*.

The New Deal

President Roosevelt set up agencies to help migrant workers find ranches that needed workers. George and Lennie work for one of these agencies – Murray and Ready.

Results of the Great Depression in *Of Mice and Men*

During times of poverty – people can become more selfish in order to survive.
Some characters do show sympathy for others (George, Candy, Slim and Crooks).
However, most of the characters (especially George) say that it is better to look out for yourself.

The result is a lack of human warmth and a lack of co-operation with each other.
Steinbeck shows that, ironically, poor people need to co-operate to escape poverty.
Only when George, Lennie, Candy and Crooks work together to buy the 'little plotta lan', do their economic prospects improve.

There is a theme of socialism (or even Communism) in *Of Mice and Men* – maybe Steinbeck's message is 'workers of the world, unite'. This reading would have been controversial in 1937, when communism was viewed as a dangerous political viewpoint in America.

Can the workers succeed?

The men's plan to buy their own farm ultimately fails. There is a disbelief that things can ever change for the better. Crooks tells George – "I didn' mean it. Jus' foolin' I wouldn't want no place like that". Steinbeck suggests that Crooks is ashamed of being hopeful. In 1937, things really did look bleak for ranch workers – it really was a time of 'Great Depression'.

Freedom, Dreams and Boredom

Life on the ranch was bleak and it was boring. George has a dream:

“Spose there was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball game, or any damn thing ... we’d just go to her – we wouldn’t ask nobody if we could”

- Carnivals, Circuses and Ball Games were sources of entertainment in 1930s.
- Steinbeck suggests that George’s poverty prevents him from enjoying life.
- More importantly – Steinbeck suggests that George wants freedom: ‘we wouldn’t ask nobody’.
- Freedom is an important part of the American Dream – but ranch hands in 1937 were not free.

This would appeal to workers in 1937, but would also have been mildly controversial.

George’s view is almost Communist – Karl Marx (the founder of Communism) also wanted freedom for workers and told them that ‘they had nothing to lose but their chains’.

Most Americans liked the current system of bosses and workers – they didn’t want it to change. American readers in 1937 might sympathise with George’s suffering, but they would also worry about workers having *too much* freedom.

The Movies

Curley’s wife marries Curley to escape the boredom of living with her mother. Her real dream was to be a movie star – she tells Lennie that a man once ‘said he was goin to put me in the movies’.

Hollywood was reaching its peak in the late 1930s and movie starlets were glamorous symbols of the American Dream. Curley’s wife’s dreams are unrealistic and superficial. She repeatedly mentions wanting ‘all them nice clothes like they were’.

Steinbeck may be suggesting that in the 1930s a woman’s main hope of achieving freedom was escaping into the glamour of the movies.

Maybe he is showing that America in the 1930s was quite a sexist place.

Maybe he is showing that the gap between the poor and the rich (movie stars) was huge.

Gender Inequality

Steinbeck's presentation of women is controversial to a modern reader.

The men visit prostitutes to escape the lack of human warmth in their lives – women (a little like the farm hands) have to sell their bodies to survive.

Curley's wife is not even given a first name – it is as if she 'belongs' to Curley.

The men in the novel have very *misogynist* views – even George is suspicious of them: 'You give me a good whore every time'.

Steinbeck presents the reader with an accurate image of the sexism in American culture in the 1930s. In 1937, the American dream was only really open to men.

Things changed during America's involvement in World War II (1941-45), when many women took on jobs to help the war effort. This gave them an independence that Curley's wife does not experience.

Later female readers in the 1970s might suggest that *Of Mice and Men* explores the theme of feminism. Curley's wife could be viewed as a prisoner of her sex, as much as the men are the prisoners of poverty.