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Naturalism and friendship  
in *Of Mice and Men*

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## Abstract

This essay covers a discussion of how naturalism and friendship are seen in the novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck. The conclusion is that various common naturalistic themes may be seen in the novel. It includes themes such as focus on lower class people, thorough and primitive portraits of characters, and the often occurring theme that people are destined to fail in life. This essay also explores two messages the essay's author argues Steinbeck wanted to convey through the novel; The importance of friendship, and a criticism of social conditions in America.

### Keywords:

John Steinbeck

Of Mice and Men

Naturalism

America

Friendship

Migrant workers

Social criticism

The American Dream

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## **1. Introduction**

Years ago I saw the 1992 film version of *Of Mice and Men* on TV. When the film was over I promised myself that I would never see the movie again, even though I had recorded it. The last scene of the story when George kills his friend was a bit too much for me at that time. It gave the story a bitter taste even though I liked the movie. The story remained in my mind, and of course I saw the movie again though it took a lot of years until that day came. It was hard to forget the story. The story is about two migrant workers in California during the 1930's. It takes place in the countryside during a time when society's attention was often pointed towards the cities, during a time of depression when the focus was far from those who struggled going from farm to farm in search of a job. There are a lot of questions we can ask about *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and its author John Steinbeck (1902-1968). What is the purpose of the book, and why are these two characters, George and Lennie, not successful? Why is the book written in non-standard English? A lot of the answers to such questions can be found by looking at the novel in the light of naturalism.

The essay will thus be focused on how the novel is coloured by naturalism. I will provide examples of how the author uses themes in the novel similar to the naturalistic movement that started in Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also that he is very American in his naturalism. I will further try to show that the book includes a message about friendship. I believe that the bond between George and Lennie is what people remember after having read the book. Many people see that there is something between them, but it is hard to put a finger on what they have. I will try to answer the question by discussing various passages in the novel, bringing in relevant thoughts from Steinbeck himself, as well as relevant literature about friendship. The discussion of naturalism is essential for the understanding of why the novel is written in the way it is, and I will further on argue that Steinbeck includes social criticism against the American society. These issues are connected to each other and create an interesting perspective of the novel.

Brief historical backgrounds both to naturalism and American society are included.

The novel in its initial form was written without chapters. I have used a new educational version of the book where the story is divided into six sections. As a consequence of this, I

sometimes refer to sections in my essay.

The people I will refer to in the book are:

**Lennie:** Main character and a migrant worker, mentally deficient and a friend of George.

**George:** Main character and migrant worker. A friend of Lennie.

**Crooks:** A black man who works at the farm, but has to stay at a place of his own because he is black.

**Curley:** The son of a boss at the farm.

**Slim:** A sympathetic man at the farm. Well seen by most people.

**Candy:** An old worker who promises to help George and Lennie get a place of their own.

The storyline in short is like this:

George and Lennie are migrant workers who go from ranch to ranch in California during the 1930's. They work at each place for a while, but they often have to move as Lennie causes them trouble. They dream of a place of their own, and Lennie wants to hear the story of this dream all the time. Lennie likes to pet soft things, and he kills a woman unintentionally when he is allowed to touch her hair. George decides that it is best if he kills Lennie before the boss's son Curley does it.

## **2. Background to naturalism**

Naturalism is a literary genre that emerged during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is closely related to realism, and both genres have a descriptive theme in their literature. Tendencies towards a descriptive literature had been seen earlier in works of Dostoyevsky, but are not considered to have had a great influence on the naturalism that appeared in France during the late 1870's. (Åhnebrink 1961:31) Émile Zola is seen as the major and most influential author in the genre, and which may be seen as an outgrowth from realism; a natural continuation in a time when science had made big discoveries. (Ibid p.21) The watchwords for the time had become observation, experience, and facts; thus the time may be characterized as an analytic time. The influences of Darwin and Marx, meant to the naturalists that nothing occult or transcendental existed, and everything happened as a matter of course. Zola wanted a literature governed by science, where the author would have almost the same role as a scientist. Literature was no longer an art, but a science. He formulated his theory in his huge study 'Les Rougon-Macquart'. Zola aimed to raise the novel to the level of science, as science during this time was seen by the naturalist writers as the ultimate truth. This transformed, though, his literature into an analysis more than fiction. (Ibid p.22) Zola and his disciples rejected the concept of free will. (Ibid p.184) The novels were often very descriptive in detail. It did not matter if the subject was nice or brutal; everything had to be portrayed as it was. (Ibid p.24)

Description of settings and other descriptive texts that did not force the story forward constituted a growing part of the novels. The main characters were mostly lower class people living in the slums of the cities, often described without any kind of mercy. As the movement's goal was to portray society as closely to reality as it could, new subjects, earlier avoided, like social misery, prostitution, and controversial issues for the day were now possible subjects. The literature was characterized by detailed description of the environment. This demanded a lot of research by the authors.

Humans were often portrayed as weak and indolent, lacking free will, and driven by their instincts. Man was often closely related to animals, an idea derived from popular interpretations of Darwin's evolution theory. The universe was seen as controlled by mechanistic laws, and thus religion and social governments were untrustworthy. (Ibid p.24-25) The usual outcome of a life was

tragic hopelessness where malice and wickedness faced the people. The novels ended often in sorrow, or annihilation. (Ibid p.28) Although the genre was meant to be an objective one where neither moralising nor satire were to be included, the genre was nevertheless critical of society. Zola believed that society had full responsibility for all misfortune that happened to the French people. At the same time as he wanted to be objective in his literature, he also wanted to aim some criticism against those in power. He was eager to depict those class-distinctions he saw, corruption, moral rotteness. (Ibid p.26) In this sense, at the same time as he is the leading figure of the naturalistic movement, he does not stick to its ideal perfectly himself. There is some kind of ambiguity over the whole genre, as though authors should be very objective in their work and not judge, yet most of them were influenced by the social ideas Marx had stated in the *Communist Manifesto*.

During the 1880's, more and more European literature was translated into English for the American market. Many Russian realist writers were published; Scandinavians like Ibsen and Germans like G. Hauptmann, and of course also Zola and other French writers. (Ibid p.49) The first reception of Zola's literature was not good. Critics disliked his plain way of portraying sex, and said that Zola was a synonym for everything of bad taste, and that they did not want such a libertine fiction in America. The hostile attitude towards naturalist literature decreased, though, as the decade passed. (Ibid p.40) The movement grew in America during the 1890's after the influence of realism during the 1880's. Authors like Frank Norris and Stephen Crane made themselves a name. Others became even more popular, but all of them shared the same ideas. They had grown up under the influence of Darwin and Spencer, and tried to integrate scientific determinism into literature. Like many other naturalistic authors, they believed mankind to have little or no control over their internal drives. Human beings were prey to natural forces. (Ibid p.28)

The portrait given in the books mirrored well the intellectuals' view of contemporary society. They saw it as a closed one characterized by the struggle to survive rather than a land of opportunity and of good morals. Usually the characters were stuck in social or environmental situations hard to get out of. This led to the conclusion that man does not have responsibility for his actions. This view clashed with what Americans in general felt to be right, and the American naturalist writer

Theodore Dreiser thus shocked the public when main characters could sin without remorse or punishment.

The influence from France and Zola showed itself in the settings of the novels. The novels dealt frequently with post-war problems, like the situation for labour, and science. An example is Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* where workers were portrayed like prisoners, weak, and hopelessly unable to change their situation. He could though at times see it as man's duty to help oneself by rising above the depressing environment around. (Ibid p.191) In contrast to Zola, many American naturalists also believed in fatalism. The terms are close to each other, but there is a slight difference. Determinism implies to that the future is fixed because of absolute causality, things around us cause our lives to be like they become, while fatalism says that the future is inevitable despite causality. The latter stresses that your life more or less is predestined, and it does not matter what you do. Fate has already decided what will happen in your life. (Ibid p.185)

It was not mainly the philosophy behind the literature, but Zola's depicting of various situations in society that inspired the American authors. They mixed their own heritage with what had reached them from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Even though the European authors were a great influence for American writers, influences came also from already established authors of American realism that had emerged in the American Midwest, authors like Eggleston, Howe and Kirkland. (Ibid p.52) American society has for a long time been pervaded by the thought of every man's dream of full development. This caused literature to be more focused on individual people rather than society as a whole. Blockage of someone's potential became more interesting to write and read about than people's failure when they already had things.

The core of American naturalism is that man is more circumscribed than conventionally acknowledged, and although people were in despair, they were still worth notice. The significance and worth of having a seeking temperament was emphasized, although there was not necessarily anything to be found from seeking. American naturalist authors during the 30's preferred to combine the naturalistic heritage with the will of expressing important things about American life, thus to teach society a lesson and show compassion for those no one cares about. Authors did not need to

be just observers but could openly have something to say. (Pizer 1982:6) Allegory became part of literature to a greater extent than in France, as American authors were more interested in depicting individuals and small groups rather than including the whole society. The small picture was still meant to be an image of the whole. (Ibid p.14)

### **3. Historical Background**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a century of change in the United States. The industrialisation that had started in Europe the century before had now finally reached America. The country was still a young country and the optimism of what could be achieved was high. Both the land area and the population grew. Immigrants arrived from Europe and Asia, and new territories became incorporated, mainly through war against Mexico or capture of land previously owned by the indigenous natives. The USA enlarged itself mainly in the south, but the frontier was little by little also moved towards the west. Many saw the continent as a land of opportunity, and there seemed to be endless land to rule. In the middle of the century, the frontier finally reached the coast of the Pacific Ocean. (Tindall & Shi 1997:466) This had a mixed impact. The dream of endless land was in one sense now over, but the paradise on earth was now found, California. The US had for a long time mostly consisted of sparsely populated rural landscape, but now the cities started to grow. Large-scale agriculture had also popped up, and became more and more common. The growth of the cities as well of the agriculture led to a concentration of labour. New cities and towns were built where industry and farming became important. There was a major shift from farming for your own use to working at someone else's farm, and this also caused people to inhabit the cities where industrial work was available.

The single most important thing that happened was probably the extension of the railroad. Cities became easily connected to each other and this facilitated trade and economic growth. The railroad network started in the east of the US where the majority of settlers had arrived and settled down. As more natural resources were found, industry moved to more places and with that the railroad. (T&S 1997:570) In the late 1840's gold was found in California, and the gold-rush started

in 1849. (T&S 1997:461) A vast number of people came when the news of gold had spread. A consequence of this people boom was that new settlements were created. New roads, schools, churches were built throughout California where immigrants settled down. The city of San Francisco was soon completely transformed from a small settlement to a boomtown. The sudden growth of cities not only created a need for new infrastructure, but also the need of proper laws. California was in 1850 admitted to the US, as a free state (no slavery allowed). (T&S 1997:466) Few people had a paper that proved them to be the owner of the estate where they lived, and consequently a lot of people took land where they could find it, and the former owners had little to say about when someone forced them to go. Although a lot of people had come to seek their fortune in gold, few people became rich, and those who became rich became very rich. The next boom for California came after 1869 when the railroad finally reached the state. Thousands of Americans could now come, and many sought a job in agricultural production. The west's fertile soil was seen as a kind of paradise on earth for many people.

Many people were now employed by someone rather than being self-supporting, and this led to a rich upper middle class. In the cities, big industrial companies had made a few people rich and turned a large amount of people into hard-working labour in the search for money; the countryside became the same. Farms enlarged and people were employed in order to work for someone else's benefit. Individuals were seen as cogs in machinery. (Åhnebrink 1961:2) The dream of freedom and opportunity for everybody did not become true for everybody.

A blow for American society came with the Civil War during the 1860's. (T&S 1997:492ff) Many young men died, especially in the south and eastern part of the country. The end of the war was the end of slavery and four million slaves were set free. After the war the economy boomed. During the following thirty years, the population in the country almost trebled, agricultural production more than doubled, and the value of companies grew sixfold. The US had gone from a rural society to a highly structured, centralized, urban-industrial society, characterized by mass production/consumption, and also time-clock efficiency. This development was close to unavoidable as the population grew rapidly due to immigration, and industry grew and improved.

The discovery of oil and steel helped industry, and it could now easily be distributed with help of the railway system.

Darwin's thesis '*On the Origin of Species*' had started to question the previously existing self-evident truth that we all were created, led and loved by God. This process was not a boom, but grew enough to become essential. The rapid expansion in industry and the whole society turned the time into a big competition where Darwin's theory found congenial soil. The social implications of the theory derived from the phrase 'the survival of the fittest', originally mentioned by Darwin's fellow Herbert Spencer, and exerted an significant influence on American thought. It meant, basically, that if the evolution were true and everything always evolved for the better, then governmental interference in social life was wrong, and individual freedom was inviolable. Social help would only delay the process for the already unfit. If someone was not strong enough, that person was doomed anyway. While social reforms did happen, thoughts were still strongly inspired by this theory. The social implication of 'the survival of the fittest' was not a part of Darwin's original thesis, and the American interpretation of *On the Origin of Species* was thus not a proper reading of what Darwin initially intended to convey by his thesis. John D. Rockefeller said once that "*The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest... ..This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the work-out of a law of nature and a law of God.*" (Åhnebrink 1961:8) Such a statement made it eventually consciously legal for some people to keep labour under rather bad conditions. Andrew Carnegie, characterizing 'the typical American success story', wrote in a famous essay that "*In the evolution of society, the contrast between the millionaire and the labour measures the distance society has come*", and "*not evil, but good has come to the race from the accumulation of the wealth by those who have the ability and energy that produces it.*" (T&S 1997:613) Although Carnegie is seen as a philanthropist, he characterizes well the self-made man and the spirit of many men in power lived in.

If people had a book at home in the beginning of the century, it was probably a bible. During the century more and more books were published, and those who could read, read. Most of the books published in the beginning were not fiction for leisure in the way we are used to today.

Everybody could not read at this time, and the fiction books published were not surprisingly aimed for the literate audience with time to read. This audience consisted mainly of fairly young wealthy women who had time to read while supported by their families/husbands. Reading skills became better and better among the population, but the style in which books were written did not change. Most books had a sentimental touch, usually featuring female main characters and a style which would evoke the reader's sympathy and emotion. A good example of such a book is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (H.B. Stowe 1852), where condemnation of slavery is conveyed in a sentimental way, and readers are expected to feel compassion with Tom since he is a faithful Christian. The invention of the steam powered Rotary printing press, in the year of 1843, made printing of literature easier than ever before. Thousands of copies could now be printed on a single day, and this caused a boom for the printing industry. The rail network helped the distribution of books, magazines, newspapers.

The 1920's were characterized by a strong belief that things would be better. (T&S 1997:794) Cities and industry grew. New things like vacuum cleaners and radios were available for a large number of people. Great effort was made by boosters in order to make people consume more. What there was left of economic culture, derived from Protestant Christianity, was greatly counteracted. A newspaper stated that "*American citizen's first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer.*" This happened during the same time as popular culture became more and more influential, jazz music, theatres, movies, radio and advertising. (T&S 1997:824) Women began to find a new role in society, and new doors, politically and economically were opened. People had good confidence about the future. The US, a country that had not experienced attack during World War I had an advantage towards many European countries. Their market could export and it was not until the second half of the 20's the European countries could take some shares back. The decade was called the roaring twenties, or the golden twenties, and the economy went into high gear. The money the industry had earned went mostly back into the companies. The companies grew bigger and bigger, and they could produce more and more. Trust in the market towards the end of the decade was too high, and the expansion people thought would go on forever stopped. The inevitable happened in October 1929; the worst economic disaster in

American history up to that time, was a fact. Earnings, although unevenly over the market, had risen by 20% in real wages during the last decade. What now waited was a 50% decline of Americans' personal incomes. Unemployment rose during the next four years from 3% to 25%. (T&S 1997:835) The depression was a constant problem during the 30's, although in varying degrees. Those who had had it tough before now had it even tougher. Severe droughts hit the Midwest during the first years of the decade. Many people tried to seek their fortune, or survival, by moving west, towards California.

#### **4. How is the novel coloured by naturalism?**

Steinbeck as an author is hard to categorize. He has both been associated with socialism, and he has been advisor to an American president. Even though I have my opinion of what Steinbeck wanted to convey with *Of Mice and Men*, I cannot be sure what he initially intended to say. He says in one letter that he does not care so much about genre, and that when a book is written that book is more or less a thing belonging to the past, while he is heading forward. (Steinbeck & Wallsten 1975:87) He says in another letter that an author should do all work himself, and never take advice from others. (Ibid p.85) I get the feeling that he just wants to write a book and have fun. He does not make my job easier when I try to analyze him.

For a story that so easily can be placed in time and space, the story is very detached from the real world. We are a few miles south of Soledad (Spanish for solitude) in California, and even though no real date is written in the book Lennie and George have been in contact with Murray and Ready's (p.42). M&R was a work agency in San Francisco, a part of Roosevelt's New Deal, and Lennie and George had most probably been in San Francisco before they headed south, via Weed, to find work. The time is probably then somewhere between 1933 when the New Deal was released, and 1937 when the book was published. Although the story takes place during the Great Depression in California where many struggled in the search of a job, the story begins as if nothing had happened at all. Steinbeck starts his story by giving a lively description of the environment. Then out of nothing two men appear, and these two are just described, almost as if we were watching

what we could see in a still webcam. The clear depiction fits well with Steinbeck's naturalistic heritage as environmental depiction was an integral part of the literary genre. (Åhnebrink 1961:24)

Further, the reality during the depression years was that many people dreamt about something of their own, but few could realize their dreams. For a long time, the American Dream had been a conscious cultural phenomenon in American mythology; James Truslow Adams wrote the definition of the American Dream in 1931:

*“...that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”* (Adams 1931:404)

George and Lennie are a good example of the dreamers of the American Dream, and also a good example of whose life could be changed if the dream was true for everyone. The dream of prosperity is unfortunately not the reality for everybody, and according to Rockefeller and Carnegie this order was good (see chapter four). As mentioned in the chapter three, American naturalistic authors tended to write about a few individuals instead of the whole society. America's cultural mythology has a more unalloyed individualistic approach to life than is generally true in Europe. That the novel is focused on two individuals, struggling for a fulfilment of their dream that never will come true, is an ingredient of the American variant of the genre. As American mythology tells us that America is the land of opportunity, a failure achieving prosperity cannot be blamed to society, but is a principle of nature itself. I argue that Steinbeck wanted to criticize the current current social economic system he saw as predestinating some people to failure, since some people think it is their right to stomp on other people in order to gain prosperity. George and Lennie's situation is according to Rockefeller *“a work-out of the laws of nature and of God”* (Åhnebrink 1961:8), and according to Carnegie American society did not need to help people like George and

Lennie since “*the contrast between the millionaire and the labour measures the distance society has come*” (T&S 1997:613). All this put together means that society is not to change something it cannot change, and it does not need to bother about migrant workers since their 'despair' is just a sign of a well-functioning society. The new important role a citizen had as a consumer (T&S 1997:824) were nothing migrant worker could live up to, and thus they were not what the new time demanded of its people.

Further, the main characters are from the lower class of society. From a literary point of view, this is not strange at all. It is an essential part of the genre, although people usually preferred books about people from higher classes. George and Lennie are losers, not at all the fittest survivors, and two people who could be icons of a lost American Dream. They contradict the mythology of America, the belief in freedom, equality, opportunity, and a social order where people are accepted for what they are. Adams tells us about a French friend who said that a main difference between America and Europe is that in America people “*look you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality.*” (Adams 1931:404) This is not true for migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men* as the workers at the farm are not seen as equals. Curley gives himself the right to punch Lennie (p.91), and Crooks has his bunk in the harness room, a distance from the others just because he is black. (Section four) The view of an equal America that Adams's friend mentioned is hard to see in *Of Mice and Men*. Thus Steinbeck chooses to depict the world as he experienced it, and not as a mythic version of reality.

In the tradition of naturalism, Steinbeck depicts his characters thoroughly, and they are portrayed in such way that we shall get an idea what kind of people they are and not only how they look. Lennie is portrayed as huge, shapeless of face, large pale eyes, sloping shoulders, walking heavily like a bear. This is not only a depiction that tells us about how he looks. We also get to know something about him. He is like a bear; he shares similarities with a bear. Further on in the story Lennie is likened by others to a bull (p.43), referred to as a cuckoo (p.65). When he in section three is hit by Curley, he “*covered his face with his huge paws and bleated with terror;*” now also referring to a sheep (p.91). He acts like a bear himself when he says he can go and live in a cave

(p.30 and p.145), and his relation to George is like that of a dog to its master. “*Good boy! That's fine, Lennie! Maybe you're getting' better... Lennie choked with pride. I can remember, he said*”

(p.33). The conclusion we may draw here is that Steinbeck has deliberately chosen to depict Lennie by comparisons with the animal kingdom. Lennie is an animal, and we can see similarities with how Zola's depiction of his characters as primitive. The portrait of Lennie is thus in line with popular perceptions of Darwin's research, that humans and animals had a common origin.

Steinbeck's choice of language is a way of making the story as realistic as possible. The story takes place among people for whom demotic English is standard. The language is an essential part of the characterization in *Of Mice and Men* as it makes the characters who they are. Language tells us about background, social status, education etc. (Holmes 2001:133) It also creates a barrier between us and them. We become aware of what we have and what they have not. It is not the fact that demotic English is spoken that is naturalistic in itself, but the fact that the author uses the type of language one expects the characters under such circumstances to use.

Steinbeck depicts the environment and his characters thoroughly. The main characters are lower class people, and they use non-standard English. The failure of a dream is also included, as well as human beings portrayed in a primitive way. It is interesting to see how Steinbeck combines a naturalistic heritage with an American touch. I think mainly of the fact that he quite openly tries to convey a message. We will look at this point in more detail in the next chapter.

## **5. The importance of friendship**

As Steinbeck said, he did not care so much about his books. (Steinbeck & Wallsten 1975:87) Why should he then include a strong moral message? An essential message from in *Of Mice and Men* is the importance of having a friend, belonging to a group. Steinbeck himself wrote in one of his letters in 1933, “*The fascinating thing to me is the way the group has a soul, a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction and a set of tropism which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group*”. (Steinbeck & Wallsten 1975:76) It is obvious with this in mind that a group, a bond between people, in Steinbeck's world creates something bigger than just the

sum of what it is composed of. This shows in the book. It is also important to remember that there was a mass migration to the cities during the time when the novel takes place, as people sought their fortune there. People worth notice were usually people with money, those who had worked themselves up in the social hierarchy. The time was influenced by the Spencerian appropriation of Darwin's research *On the Origin of Species* (1859), sometimes referred to as 'Social Darwinism'. George and Lennie do not fit into the category of those fittest in the society. It is a subversive thing to do publishing a book about two people who have nothing else but their friendship and their fruitless labour. In American mythology, prosperity is promised to all, but because of the social reality just a few succeed. The dream of a better life for everybody is consequently not true and cannot be true for everybody. George and Lennie belong unfortunately to the group doomed to fail.

The difference between George and all the other people at the farm is that George has got a friend in Lennie. George says in the first chapter (p.31):

*“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world, they got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to... With us it ain't like that. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them guys other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn.*

*But not us,”* and Lennie continues *“But not us! An' why? Because ... because I got you to look after me, and I got you to look after me, and that's why.”* Migrant life was lonely, rootless, unforgiving and without guarantee. Migrant workers had a tough time during the depression and had had for a long time. They went from ranch to ranch in search of a job. What George says illustrates the social conditions of the novel. Workers were usually just seen as workers and nothing more; as George says: the optimism of the roaring 20's is gone. George and Lennie are different as they have each other. They are also different to those who *“belong no place”* as George and Lennie have a goal;

they will one day have a place of their own.

Lennie is in many ways very different to George but he is still a friend for George; a friend who can be characterized as more than just a casual friend. They provide strong emotional support to each other and their relation is therefore better characterized as a close friendship. (Baron & Byrne 1993:309) A contrast to George and Lennie is Crooks. He has no friend; he is a 'nigger' and is therefore not living with the others. While white people could hide their loneliness behind something, African-Americans seldom had anything to hide behind. In section four, Lennie has come into Crooks's room and Crooks tries to highlight the difference between himself and Lennie. Crooks says (p.103): "*S'pose George don't come back no more... What'll you do then*"? Lennie does not like talk about 'supposing' and gets angry. Lennie's clumsy and uneducated manner depicts him as abnormal. It is, however, hard to be angry at him since Lennie's character is sympathetically depicted and closely related to innocence. Lennie does not want to hurt anybody, he is just unable to perform better. His inability to change is essential in the genre. People like Lennie are more occupied by what is here and now. Abstract thinking is not their greatest skill. Lennie is in need of a safe environment where he knows how things are going to be as he cannot understand other social conventions and thinks good of everybody. The thought of life without George causes Lennie's world to tremble. Lennie's reaction is thus normal for people in his position. Then, from a factual perspective, Lennie would be doomed without George, as George has essential skills and knowledge Lennie has not. (Ibid p. 484) Moreover, the genre of naturalism is mainly a study of what happens, not of what could have happened. However, Steinbeck does break naturalistic conventions as he tries to convey a moral message.

Crooks tells how he has sat night after night reading and thinking, and has never had anyone to talk to. (p.105) "*He got nothing to measure by. I seen things out there. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an' then it would be all right. But I jus' don't know.*" This passage shows in many ways what loneliness is, and what it is for him. His loneliness has detached him from the world. He does not know if what he sees is right or wrong. He says that if he had someone to talk to, then he could be all right. But apparently he has

no friends. I would say that he is the personification of the lonely one. Crooks is black in a world where white people have the power and oppress the black mostly mentally but also physically. He does not have the right to live with the others at the ranch, but has to have a place of his own. He is used to doing the jobs no one else wants to do. He has no one to talk to about all those important and unimportant things that one needs to talk about. He says that he is not certain about things he thinks he has seen. His lack of social contact has led him to distrust his own senses. Crooks has in the same section a very interesting line, when Lennie has calmed down: (p.104-105):

*Maybe you see now. You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody – to be near him. He whined. A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell you, he cried, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick.*

The portrait of Crooks can be seen as a social critique of racism, but I argue that the most important role he plays in the novel is as a contrast to George and Lennie. It becomes very obvious what George and Lennie have got when we see Crooks who has no friend. In a wider perspective, this tells us something really universal, the fact that we all need people around us and that very few people can stand loneliness. Without a friend we are no one in society, in contact with others we become someone. In the beginning of the conversation between Lennie and Crooks, Crooks tries to depict himself by telling the possible scenario that Lennie could be abandoned by George. It is not until later when Lennie cannot stand that thought anymore that Crooks reveals what he says is actually a picture of his own life. Crooks is what Lennie does not want to be. Crooks's feeling of being lonely is what both George and Lennie would have if they had not had each other. George is very aware that he easily could taste the same life that Crooks has. That is why he says in section two (p.57) *"It's a lot nicer to go around with a guy you know"* when asked why he hangs with

Lennie. The inevitable for some and possible alternative for many others is what Crooks mentions in section four after he has heard Candy's and Lennie's plan (p.109): "*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.*"

No matter how much of a misfit Lennie is, he can still be for George what George essentially needs in life; someone who wants to be with him and loves him unconditionally. Important things in friendship are honesty and faithfulness, and to a lesser extent intelligence. (Taylor 2006) George knows this, and he also knows that few people will be able to take Lennie's place. He knows that he would become lonely like anyone else without Lennie, and the bond that they have would break. He would lose that extra thing that Steinbeck says appears in a group. This explains why George is not mad at Lennie in the last section of the book. Lennie says in section six (p.145): "*Ain't you gonna give me no more hell?*" and George answers: "*No*". Later in the same section Lennie asks again (p.147): "*I thought you were mad at me, George?*". "*No, George said*". George knows what Lennie has done and he has every reason to be mad at him, but he knows what he has to do (kill Lennie), and he is aware of what that will lead to. He will become lonely like many other migrant workers. It is in one way impossible for him to be mad at Lennie as he gives him the essential good in life, and now he will 'cut the branch while he is sitting on it'.

Lennie represents a kind of dream world that George could retreat into. The regular migrant worker life caused many of them to dream, and Lennie was the one who would never abandon the American Dream, the dream that they one day would have something of their own. The other workers had western magazines (p.38) that ranch men love to read and secretly believe. George did not just have magazines that could promote the American Dream for him; he had a friend, a human being of flesh and blood who could never stop reminding him about how their future should be. In the beginning of the novel (p.31) Lennie says: "*Tell me – like you done before... about the rabbits.*" and in the end (p.145) Lennie says: "*Tell me like you done before... about the other guys an' about us.*" The loss of Lennie is in one way a loss of something of himself.

At the end of the book, Slim is the only one who fully understands what it meant to George losing

Lennie. He has understood what a true friendship meant to George. This explains why he takes care of George while the others stand still wondering why George is down. Something we will never get to know though is if Slim from the beginning of the story saw George as doomed, that George is one of those Crooks talks about when he says (p.106):

*I see hunderds of men come by on the road an' that same damn thing in their head. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one gets it. Just like heaven ...It's just in their head.*

The fact that an African-American person is portrayed in a human way in the novel shows that Steinbeck was ahead of his time. Black people were not a part of the literature, and that Crooks has many important lines in the novel is unusual for its time.

## **6. Conclusion**

I have argued that Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' is a novel coloured by themes from naturalism. Various aspects in the novel show this. The most important aspects are the lower class main characters, the fact that George and Lennie never achieve their dream, but fail fatally. Steinbeck has further depicted both the environment and the characters thoroughly, and Lennie is often portrayed as if he were an animal. The demotic language is also faithfully included. Consequently, we may see that his novel has an American touch of naturalism compared to the European naturalist authors in that he is mostly occupied around two individuals rather than a big society. I argue, however, that there is social criticism in the novel and that George and Lennie represent the majority of migrant workers during the 30's. Though it might be hard to know what Steinbeck really wanted to say, I have argued that the author wanted to convey a message of friendship. In a time of crisis where migrant worker had a hard time, Steinbeck depicts a warm story of how two people, very different to each other, can find something essential in life in each other. Lennie is honest and faithful and

loves George unconditionally. As a contrast to what George has in Lennie, we see Crooks who has no one to rely on. The inclusion of Crooks reinforces the impression that George has a pearl in Lennie, although he does not always want to admit that. I have shown that it becomes obvious for George what he has in Lennie in the end scene when he cannot be mad at him. What George actually does is letting one of the most essential parts of his life leave him, although he has no other choice. Further, I have argued that Steinbeck combines a naturalistic heritage with a strong moral message that everybody needs a friend no matter if we are rich or poor.

It lies in the American naturalist tradition both to convey messages and social criticism. I have argued that *Of Mice and Men* includes a critique on American mythology and the American Dream, especially the social interpretations these two concepts have on American society. George and Lennie are a proof that everybody cannot gain prosperity like the mythology says. Social conditions prevent people from achieving the goal of American society; the realization of the American Dream. Thus, America is not the land of opportunity for everybody, but just for a few. By quoting both Rockefeller and Carnegie, I have shown that those in power have little interest in a realization of the American Dream for all. The opposite is, however, a more desired scenario. Crooks prominent role in the novel is unusual for its time, since few black people had essential roles in society, and the novel may therefore be seen as little voice for Africa-American people's right to fair representation. If this is the message Steinbeck really wanted to convey is another story, and he did not seem to be interested in what other people thought about his books. I have, however, argued that *Of Mice and Men* is a novel that contains criticism of the American society, and an unspoken dialogue with American mythology. Steinbeck has incorporated these messages in a novel that on the surface seems to be only a naturalistic story of 'something that happened'.

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