

Of Mice and Men: Contemporary Reviews and Critical Reception

Published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* is remembered as one of Steinbeck's most important and influential novels. Chronicling a few days in the lonely lives of two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, *Of Mice and Men* shows the devastating impact that the Great Depression had on many American's ability to succeed financially. Like Steinbeck's other work written during the Great Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Of Mice and Men* comments on the elusiveness of the American Dream and the false hope of material prosperity that is often dangled in front of the lower and middle classes. Steinbeck took the title of his novel from a line in Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse": "The best laid schemes o' mice and men/ Gang aft a-gley/ An' leave us naught but grief an' pain/ For promised joy" (Burns). According to critic Michael Meyer, Steinbeck "especially liked the parallels suggested by the poem's story-line which depicts the random destruction of a mouse's home by a plow." Meyer further asserts that Steinbeck felt that there were striking similarities between "the fate of the mouse and humanity [. . .] that human efforts and dreams for the unattainable are ultimately as futile as a rodent trying to protect his home from the more powerful blade of a plow." The near impossibility of attaining the American Dream in the face of huge and random challenges, like natural and economic disasters, became the central theme of Steinbeck's novel.

As Megan Chaudet points out in "20th Century American Best Sellers," many of the contemporary reviews of *Of Mice and Men* "were extremely positive and considered the new novel well up to par with [Steinbeck's] previous novels." The novel was also highly anticipated, selling "117, 000 copies [. . .] in advance of the official publication date, February 25, 1937" (Meyer). It was also a selection for the book of the month club. Biographer Jackson Benson reports the novel "[...] hit the best-seller lists almost immediately. Both Hollywood and Broadway were quick to see the novel's dramatic possibilities" (351). Hollywood began pressuring Steinbeck for a screenplay and the first stage production of the novel was underway right after the text was published (Benson 351). According to a 1937 review by the *New Republic*, *Of Mice and Men* "[...] has that common denominator of most good imaginative writing, a shadow of the action that means something beyond the action" (qtd. in Chaudet). Furthermore, the *New Republic* states, "[t]he book is well contrived and effectively compressed, driving ahead with straight and rapid movements, as magnificently written as Steinbeck's other four California novels" (qtd. in Chaudet). Many reviewers lauded Steinbeck's ability to make such a poignant and important statement about humanity and its persistent struggle to rise above its own shortcomings in such a brief a text. James Brown of the *Saturday Review of Literature* wrote in 1937, "The story is simple but superb in its understatement, its realisms which are used not to illustrate behavior, but for character and situation" (qtd. in Chaudet). Tom Cameron of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1939 that *Of Mice and Men* is a quintessential example of the "vividly striking realities with intellectual patterns" that characterize Steinbeck's best work, which he argues was lost upon Steinbeck's move to New York in 1939 (qtd. in Fensch 18).

While overall the reception of *Of Mice and Men* was overwhelmingly positive, staunch debunker of Steinbeck, Edmund Wilson, criticized the novel for "Steinbeck's preoccupation with biology," which "led

him 'to present life in animal terms'" (Meyer). He saw *Of Mice and Men* as a simple social representation of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. Lennie must die as he represents the weak in society who are unfit for survival. An early review in *The Book Review Digest* expressed a similar sentiment accusing Steinbeck of creating characters who are incapable of thinking rationally for themselves: "it is rather that each of them follows some instinct as a bull follows the chain which runs through a hole in his nose, or as a crab moves toward its prey" (qtd. in Chaudet). Some critics were disappointed that Steinbeck did not give his audience the typical happy ending customary for literary underdog characters like George and Lennie. Steinbeck instead chose to show the realities of life and the flippancy of fate through Lennie's death and George's loss.

Though there has been some negative criticism of the novel over the last 70 years, and it has been both censored and banned for its use of offensive language, *Of Mice and Men* is "still considered influential internationally" finding great success in Japan and the United Kingdom in particular (Chaudet). It has been translated into numerous languages and is still enormously popular in the United States. Like many of Steinbeck's works, *Of Mice and Men* has the unique ability to capture an important period in American history while containing values that transcend specific time frames and cultures. Moreover, the characters in *Of Mice and Men* show a difficult truth about loneliness and an unreachable dream-- something that most people, no matter their nationality or social station, can identify with.

Courtesy: The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies