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On the Road to Tragedy: Mice, Candy, and Land in *Of Mice and Men*

It has often been suggested that the Candy-and-his-dog subplot in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is too much, that it is a typical example of Steinbeck's heavyhandedness or overfondness for parallels.[1] In fact, some student and workshop productions of the play omit the dog entirely. But Candy and the dog are very important to the action. The point of Carlson's shooting of the dog—who is old and blind and smells—is not to make an easy parallel with George's shooting of Lennie, as Peter Lisca and Harry T. Moore seem to think.[2] It is not so much the dog who is in the same position as the imbecilic Lennie; it is the shooting of the dog that places Candy in the same position. Once he does not have his dog to look after anymore, Candy realizes the precariousness of his own position on the ranch: he is without one hand and therefore only able to "swamp out" bunkhouses, and he is fast approaching senility.

To stress the similarity between Candy's position and Lennie's, Steinbeck has Candy, and no other character in the play, treat Lennie as his mental equal. Furthermore, George never explains Lennie's condition to Candy as he does, say, to Slim. Not accidentally, it is to Lennie that Candy describes the "figuring" he has been doing, describing how, if they go about it right, they can make some money on the rabbits they propose to have on their farm (even if Lennie, for his part, can think of noth-

-ing except petting the rabbits). Candy *sounds* like Lennie when he says, "We gonna have a room to ourselves. We gonna have a dog and chickens. We gonna have green corn and maybe a cow."[3] Furthermore, he acts like Lennie when he comes into Crooks's room in the barn, saying only, "This is the first time I ever been in [Crooks's] room"; he seems honestly not to realize that the reason for this is that, as Crooks declares, "Guys don't come in a colored man's room" (128). Yet Candy has been on the ranch for a long time, just as Crooks has.

Like Lennie, Candy needs someone to run his affairs, to make the rest of his life easier and more congenial. He needs George. Slim promises Candy a puppy from his bitch Lulu's litter to compensate for the shooting of his sheep dog, but Candy never gets that puppy, and he never asks for it. Lennie can attempt to look after a pup, because he has George to look after him. Candy is in search of a home for *himself*; he cannot afford, at this point, to give one to a dog. But Candy, finally, is not Lennie, and George will not team up with him after Lennie is gone. Candy does not accompany the men in their hunt for Lennie after Curley's wife is found dead in the barn. He stays all alone on the ranch, deserted by everyone, as it were, even as he will be by George after Lennie has been shot. Candy's "Poor bastard" (161), spoken to Curley's dead wife (lying in the hay) once the men have left, could just as well be applied to himself as to Lennie or Curley's wife.

There is tragedy in *Of Mice and Men*, then, despite Stanley Kauffmann's (among others) suggestion to the contrary.[4] That is why Candy is in the play. The tragedy is so understated, however, that one barely notices it. This tragedy really has nothing to do with George's shooting of Lennie, per se. As the film critic Otis Ferguson once remarked, "I have never been quite sure that George shouldn't have shot [Lennie] before the story began" (Ferguson 285). Ferguson was not trying to be funny. His meaning was that Lennie is a "case" on the loose, and that his killing of Curley's wife, and being shot for it by George, could just as easily have happened before or after the play as during it. Steinbeck

arranges for it to happen during the play, after the two men meet Candy. Does he do this just to inspire sympathy for poor Lennie, as many believe?[3] His point was that George deeply loved this "idiot" with the result that he always wanted Lennie to be with him in his travels and in his work. Once he shoots Lennie, George can still get the farm with Candy if he wants to. (Recall that it is largely Candy's money that will buy the farm, and Candy is still more than willing to put up that money.) George declines, which proves that being in one safe place with *Lennie* was more important to him than simply being in one safe place. He elects to continue living the hard life of a ranchhand rather than settle down to life on a small farm with Candy. George can have a better life, yet he turns it down. Unquestionably, he will suffer more on the road, without Lennie, than on the farm, without Lennie. He never gives himself a chance to, in his words, "get used to" Candy.

This is not simple pathos. It approximates tragedy because it suggests not simply that *George loved Lennie too much* — that he was unnaturally attached to him — but also that only by developing an unnatural attachment to Lennie could he ever have put up with (and done so much for) someone like him in the first place. The implication of George's rejection of Candy's offer is that he is sentencing himself to the same fate as other "guys that go round on the ranches alone" (77); he will not have any fun, and after a while he will get mean. He will live out the fate predicted for him by Crooks, an accompaniment to, or extension of, the tragic inevitability of the play. As Crooks explains:

> I seen hundreds of men come by on the road and on the ranches, bindles on their back and that same damn thing in their head. Hundreds of 'em. They come and they quit and they go on. And every damn one of 'em is got a little piece of land in his head. And never a goddamn one of 'em gets it. (126)

The implication is that George will have that little piece of land in his head once again, after months of working hard and blowing his money in "cathouses" and pool rooms Only then will he

become tragically aware of how he really lost his land—not by losing Lennie, but by rejecting Candy—and how he will never be given the chance to get it again. Like Othello, he will have loved not wisely but too well. Like any other tragic hero's, his awareness will be one of self-acceptance more than self-reproach.

So while the play underlines the bond of friendship—and loneliness—that exists between George and Lennie (a bond difficult for some in today's audiences to accept on any but homosexual grounds), it also makes that bond responsible for George's rash decision not to buy the small farm with Candy's financial assistance. We are in full sympathy with George when he makes this decision; still, we cannot help but feel at the same time that he is making a mistake, that he is doing something noble yet horrible and wasteful (of Candy's life as well as his own). Candy's "Poor bastard" this time applies to George, whom we leave alone, with the dead Lennie, at the end of the play.

George, it must be said, is not especially articulate or self-examining. He has never married; Lennie is instead his emotional attachment. He does not make many friends or ask many questions. Candy is his only "attachment" to the ranch. Candy first fills him in about the Boss, then about Curley and his wife, Crooks, and Slim. Candy, with his life savings, becomes George's way out of the ranch life. With Lennie dead, he potentially becomes George's emotional attachment. He is, in the end, the embodiment or articulation of all the aims and emotions that George in his sorrow is oblivious to, but which will live to haunt him again. That is why Steinbeck ends scenes one and two of Act III with Candy and George in the same position: hunching over dead bodies. They are in the same position, in need of each other but inalterably separated. Finally they are silent, one seemingly in memory of the other.

Like George, the play's tragedy is quiet. Like George, the play seems to focus more on Lennie that its own life. That similarity, more than anything else, shows the play's identification with George. The play sacrifices attention to him for attention to

Lennie. That is the way George would have wanted it, and that is why, unfairly, *Of Mice and Men* has too often been called nothing more than a work of sentiment.[6] Sentimentality is usually accounted a vice, because it bespeaks a propensity to express a greater degree of feeling than a specific situation warrants. But sentimentality need not be a vital flaw; it isn't in *Of Mice and Men*, where Steinbeck controls it.

Much more than a work of sentiment, *Of Mice and Men* comes to George's tragedy the long way around, through Candy. Lennie is not diminished by this; rather, George and Candy are elevated. One of the ways in which George in particular is elevated is through Steinbeck's thorough weaving of the seemingly throwaway, sentimental symbol of the mouse into the fabric of the play's action. We see that symbol first in the play's title, which Steinbeck took from the well-known Robert Burns poem "To a Mouse" containing the line "The best-laid schemes o'mice and men, / Gang aft agley [go oft astray]." It is clear why the dramatist so borrowed the phrase "of mice and men," for George and Lennie's plan to get a small place of their own goes astray once Lennie kills Curley's wife. But there is another, less immediately apparent reason, for Steinbeck uses the dead mouse to symbolize the past and to foreshadow the future.

To wit, Lennie always killed the mice that his Aunt Clara gave him to play with by pinching their heads; he could have killed the girl in the town of Weed when he tried to feel her dress (as if she were a mouse) and she strongly resisted. He and George were chased out of Weed because of this incident, and, at the start of the play, they are on their way to a ranch job in the Salinas Valley when they stop for the night in a small clearing. George throws into the brush the dead mouse that Lennie has been secretly petting during their journey, but Lennie retrieves it when he goes for firewood. George then takes it from him again and tosses it as far away as he can.

George's action is symbolic, for he is removing from his sight an omen of the future. After they go to work, Lennie kills

first the puppy Slim gives him by handling it too often and too roughly; then he kills Curley's wife by accidentally breaking her neck when she tries to stop him from stroking her hair so hard. He flees the ranch and returns to the small clearing to wait for George, who has told him to go there if he gets into trouble. Lennie returns, that is, to the place where his past and his future converged in the symbol of the mouse, and where he, as a kind of pet to George, will await at George's hands the fate of the mice, the puppy, and Curley's wife: death.

The play is thus the story of two men and the symbolic mice that surround them and contribute to their doom—a doom that originates, in the first place, in the very nature of their relationship: Lennie's dimwitted "mouse" to George's thoughtful man. Even as Lennie "loved" the mice, the puppy, and Curley's Wife so much that he inadvertently killed them, so too, as I have argued, George loved Lennie so much that he wound up having to kill him. He wanted to remain with Lennie and lead a normal life eventually on a small farm, whereas the best place for his friend would have been in a home or hospital or even in the wild. Just when they are able to get the farm with the help of Candy's money, the inevitable happens and Lennie kills Curley's wife. George then shoots Lennie as one would an animal, as he wants him neither to suffer a savage death at Curley's hands, nor, if he escaped death, to waste away in jail. It is no accident that in the opening scene of *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie is likened to an animal; George angrily proclaims that he should be in a cage with lots of mice where they can pet him, and Lennie retaliates by saying that perhaps he would be better off alone, living in the hills or in a cave.

Although Steinbeck first wrote *Of Mice and Men* in the form of a novel, of course, I think that the story of Lennie and George, and Candy, is better suited to the drama into which he eventually turned it.[7] George, as I have suggested, is a more or less mute protagonist, and in the story *as novel* we expect Steinbeck, as the narrator, to speak for him and to explain his reasoning and his

feelings. But Steinbeck does not. This fact, more specifically, is why the novel, together with its extension as a play, has often struck readers overwhelmingly as a work of sentiment. By documenting the story of George and Lennie without fully accounting for George's role in events and *the full effect of events on him*, the novel seems if not thereby to glorify George's suffering, then to martyr Lennie.

The play doesn't have this problem, or shouldn't to the attentive reader or spectator.[8] It has no narrator, obviously, so we don't expect anyone to speak for George. We therefore accept his muteness more easily, and we look for the materials of the drama itself to speak for him. Because of the necessary condensation of the dramatic form, we see more distinctly the choice he has, after Lennie's death, between life alone on the road and life on a farm with Candy. We see all the more powerfully, because they are embodied on stage, the love and compassion George has for Lennie. Hence the drama is ideally suited to the portrayal of George Milton's tragedy, because, even as his actions speak for themselves, so too does the drama's action—or imitation of an action—speak for itself. This drama, like most drama, has no narrator, and George is unable or unwilling to "narrate" his deepest feelings and sorrows. Quietly, through the strategic placement of Candy in the action, *Of Mice and Men* dramatizes George's tragedy. Quietly, through his automatic rejection of life on the farm with Candy, George conveys to us, perhaps better than the words of a more articulate man ever could, the depth of his love for Lennie and the extent to which he is willing to—and can do nothing but—suffer for that love.

In the end, Steinbeck touched some deep American themes in *Of Mice and Men*: the great myth of the road and two male companions, of our hunger for "brotherhood"—a feeling enhanced by the seeming loneliness of all Americans during the Great Depression. For this reason, perhaps, the thirties were years when the theater, along with the other arts, rediscovered America. *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), one of several of Lynn Riggs's

Oklahoma plays, Erskine Calduell's *Tobacco Road* (1933), and Paul Osborn's *Morning's at Seven* (1939) are among the works that in one way or another perform a function similar to that of Steinbeck's play. *Of Mice and Men*, unlike the many (New York) city plays from the 1930s, for its part naturalistically concentrates on the unemployed of the farm lands—the itinerants and ranch workers—while it also alludes to the bus and truck drivers whose travels through the country permitted them to observe the state of the nation in its broad horizon.

A strong residue of nineteenth-century feeling about the land persists in *Of Mice and Men*—that working on the land is the basic good while owning some of it is salvation. There exists no other successful American drama since the mid-to-late thirties with that feeling (except peripherally, as in the case of the itinerant actor James Tyrone's obsession with land-ownership in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941)), or even one centered on rural work. Steinbeck knows our erstwhile longing for a home on the range, not a mere feeding place. He has the same genuine sympathy for the lonesome devil whose sole companion is a mangy old dog as for the black American cut off from his fellow workers because of his skin color. Indeed, Steinbeck uses something like an austere sorrow, as opposed to the radical politics of John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, or his own novels *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), to suggest that none of America's "underprivileged" will ever reach the home *they* crave until they arrive at a greater social consciousness. Because of what has happened since it was written — the rapid decline of family farming, the relentless burgeoning of mechanized agribusiness — *Of Mice and Men* has come to be a play about the end not only of George and Lennie, but also of something in America, in American drama, and in the American dream.

NOTES

1 See Robert Murray Davis's introduction to *Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical*

Essays for a discussion of this common criticism of Steinbeck's work; he writes, "When structural patterns in Steinbeck's novels are clear, they are almost blindingly obvious" (p.4).

2 In an otherwise highly laudatory reading of the "play-novelette," as he calls it, as a Biblical allegory (George=Cain and Lennie=Abel), Peter Lisca writes:

> Less subtle, perhaps too obvious, is the relationship of Candy and his dog, which is made parallel to that of George and Lennie . . . Thus the mounting threats to the dog and his eventual shooting foreshadow the destruction of George's "dog," Lennie, which eventually takes place, shot by the same gun in the same way—"right in the back of the head . . . why he'd never know what hit him." (qtd. from Peter Lisca, *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* pp. 84-85.)

Harry T. Moore goes so far as to say that "one of the most noticeable of the many little tricks [that] have been used throughout the story to prepare us for Lennie's death is the obvious comparison of Lennie with a worthless old dog that must be shot, as Lennie must be at at the last" (qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study* 52).

3 John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1937), p. 129. All citations are to this edition.

4 In a review of the 1975 New York production of *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Edwin Sherlin, Stanley Kauffmann of *The New Republic* wrote:

> The tragic inevitability at which Steinbeck aimed is dimmed by the creakiness of the arrangments. We know with somewhat pleasant ironical foreknowledge in the first scene, when the two friends discuss their plans to have a place of their own, that they will never get it; but Steinbeck ensures the grim ending with the nervous young husband at the ranch and his arbitrarily restless wife. Besides, Lennie's feeble-mindedness mitigates the tragedy. He is a "case" on the loose, not a man suspectible to trouble. If he were only slow-witted, instead of defective, there would be some hint of what his life might have been. With the idiot Lennie there are no alternatives. (qtd. from Stanley Kauffmann, *Persons of the Drama* 158.)

Harry T. Moore is more illuminating on the subject of *Of Mice and Men* as tragedy, but his view of George as no more than a pathetic character is the opposite of mine:

> Violence without tragedy: that is the weakness of this book. . . . There is no tragedy as we understand the word in reference to literature. . . . There is no authentic

> tragedy, which comes out of character. Even if we slur over the criticism that Lennie is a poor choice for a central figure in the story because from the start the odds against him are too great—even if we get beyond this and admit George as the true protagonist, we still don't find tragedy. George is no more than pathetic. He attracts sympathy because he has to lose his friend Lennie, to whom he has been so loyal, and whom he has to kill at the last in order to save him from the others. But because this isn't genuine tragedy, it gives the reader a brutal shock when George kills Lennie, and it cannot be anything else . . . (qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study* 50-52.)

Howard Levant, for his part, criticizes *Of Mice and Men* for what he believes to be its split focus:

> The secondary hero is subordinate in Steinbeck's fiction—except in *Of Mice and Men*. There, Lennie's murder propels George into a sudden prominence that has no structural basis. Is the novel concerned with Lennie's innocence or George's guilt? The formal requirements of a play-novelette mandate a structural refocus. Steinbeck needs a high point to ring down the curtain. With Lennie dead, Steinbeck must use and emhasize George's guilt. The close is formulated—the result of a hasty switch—not structured from preceding events, so it produces an inconclusive ending in view of what has happened previously. And the ideal of the farm vanishes with Lennie's death, when George tells Candy the plan is off. (qtd. from Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study* 143.)

5 See especially Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, p. 141.

6 See, for example, Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study*, p. 51; Kauffmann, *Persons of the Drama*, p. 157; and Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* , p. 398.

7 In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin claims that *Of Mice and Men* is "openly written for the stage" (p. 399), and Harry T. Moore elaborates:

> Structurally, the novel was from the first a play: it is divided into six parts, each part a scene—the reader may observe that the action never moves away from a central point in each of these units. Steinbeck's manner of writing was coming over quite firmly to the dramatic. . . . After *Of Mice and Men* was published and the suggestion was made that it be prepared for the stage, Steinbeck said it could be produced directly from the book, as the earliest

moving pictures had been produced. It was staged in almost exactly this way in the spring of 1937 by a labor-theater group in San Francisco . . . When Steinbeck transferred the story into final dramatic form for the New York stage he took 85% of his lines bodily from the novel. A few incidents needed juggling, one or two minor new ones were introduced, and some (such as Lennie's imaginary speech with his Aunt Clara at the end of the novel) were omitted. A Hollywood studio bought the film rights to *Of Mice and Men*, but the picture has not been made yet (qtd. from Harry T. Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study*, 48-49). Moore was writing in 1939; the Lewis Milestone-directed film of *Of Mice and Men* was released in 1940, to be followed over half a century later by Gary Sinise's film of the play, with a screenplay by the dramatist Horton Foote.)

8 For the opposite view—that, *because* Steinbeck structured the novel of *Of Mice and Men* as a play, he restricted his narrative to visible action and thus was unable fully to explore complex human motives and relationships—see Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, p. 134-135.

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