

The Context of *Of Mice and Men*

Overview

- Written in 1937 within the context of the Great Depression (began in 1929 and didn't truly end until the Second World War began) and its effect on the Californian working class.
- Steinbeck drew heavily from his own experiences as a teenage farm hand in California – he had lived through many of the same experiences as his characters. It also draws from his friendship with Ed Ricketts, an early proponent of ecological thinking.
- Steinbeck was very political; he worked as a reporter prior to the publication of *Tortilla Flat* (his first commercially successful novel) and thought of farmers, landowners and bankers as immoral in the way by which they exploited workers. *Of Mice and Men* is an example of a social protest novel – in the tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. However, where *Of Mice and Men* diverges from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is in its relative lack of idealism.
- Steinbeck did not abide by the Romanticism (focus on human ideals, moral virtue, emotional sensibility) and was instead one of the first and most influential American proponents of literary realism. Rather than try and show the world as it could be, Steinbeck was interested in showing the world as it was.
- His terse style was heavily influenced by his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway. He, much like Hemingway, focussed on themes such as masculinity and manliness; as evidenced by the book's intense focus on what makes a man – often at the expense of its characterisation of women.
- The inspiration behind the title of the novella came from Robert Burns' *To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest With the Plough, November, 1785*. The original title was 'Something that Happened'.

Historical Context

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* in 1937 in an America that was ravaged by the Great Depression. In 1929 there was an enormous stock market crash – caused by speculation – that wiped out the savings of many middle Americans. The U.S.A responded to the crisis by a policy of isolationism, cutting imports and focussing on domestic production. This was a decidedly bad idea. There was an enormous demand for crops to feed the population in an era where one couldn't rely on sourcing basic necessities from elsewhere. Farmers, bankers and landowners took advantage of the crisis to grow their own estates at the expense of workers – particularly migrant workers (those without a home, rather than those that came from foreign countries). The increased demand for crops meant an increased demand for workers, certainly, but the supply of workers grew at a much larger rate as people lost their savings, sources of income and often even their houses. Lennie and George are both built of this mould – they have no place to call home so they dream of somewhere where they can settle. Many dismiss their dream as one that millions have had and have never manage to fulfil. Here, Steinbeck mounts an obvious criticism of what was, until 1931 when the term was coined by James Truslow Adams, an unspoken national ethos – the American Dream. This was the idea that “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement”. That no matter one's circumstances, one could always make it in America. Steinbeck demonstrates that this was ludicrous in the sheer determinism (the idea that the path of our lives is decided on with little input from ourselves) of the novella.

Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California – the setting of *Of Mice and Men* – and was familiar with the local farms, fields and woods, all wonderfully brought to life within the book. Steinbeck had worked as a farmhand himself as a teenager. Born to a comfortable enough life, he had never before been confronted by the viciousness that characterised the life of the American migrant worker. Until 1928, he survived doing odd jobs in New York and California, working as a tour guide, caretaker, and manufacturer of plastic mannequins amongst other things. Once the economy crashed, he moved into a cottage paid for by his parents and received loans from them so he could write without worrying about work. This time was not without its difficulties: once the market crashed in 1929, Steinbeck and his wife, Carol, would live off fish and crabs they caught from their boat along with vegetables from their garden. When they couldn't find these, they often stole from local markets. However, much in the spirit of his social conscience, Steinbeck would always share his ill-gotten gains with his friends.

During this time, he became friends with Ed Ricketts, an early proponent of ecological thinking – a school of thought where man was not the centre of the universe, but instead part of a much larger chain of being which he could neither comprehend nor understand. The influence this had on Steinbeck’s writing is obvious – the characters in *Of Mice and Men* are completely unaware of the larger forces which govern their lives. For example, Curley’s father, the Boss, is unnamed and only appears once in the novella. He is entirely removed from the goings on at the farm, and the workers themselves dub him ‘fair’. Still, he pays the migrant workers exploitative wages and is entirely unwilling to reign in his violent and small-minded son, whom with his wife is the cause of much of the misery in the novella.

All of this points to *Of Mice and Men*’s status as a social protest novel. Steinbeck’s activism is well-known. He was extremely sympathetic to the plight of migrant workers, writing several novels examining their lives, as well as a series of articles entitled *The Harvest Gypsies* for The San Francisco News. In his journal, an entry from 1938 reads “In every bit of honest writing in the world there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other.” His novels, above all else, are about sympathising with the powerless and weak, those made so often through no fault of their own. It is a criticism of the socio-economic conditions that lead to their beleaguered state. The novella has often been banned for perceived vulgarity – it has been accused of racism, promoting euthanasia and sexism. These criticisms have some merit. However, it has also been targeted for censorship (often more successfully) because of it being ‘anti-business’. As a result, it is the 6th most banned novel in U.S. History. Following the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck wrote “The vilification of me out here from the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the Okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. I’m frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing. It is completely out of hand; I mean a kind of hysteria about the book is growing that is not healthy”. It would be quite reasonably to postulate that he held a similar attitude following the reception *Of Mice and Men* received from the same class of people. The novella may feature (arguably) few actual oppressors, but the use of negative space to portray the hopelessness of the characters brings home the point about oppression in a particularly powerful way. It portrays something akin to what Hannah Arendt, in an article

about Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, called the 'banality of evil' – an evil which is unaware of its own cruelty.

Literary Context

Novels of this kind were common enough in America – deeply moralistic pieces with somewhat underdeveloped characters are a tradition dating back to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an anti-slavery novel whose protagonist, Tom, is a noble and principled black slave who stands up for his ideals and earns the grudging respect of his white oppressors. Stowe's novel is credited with altering American attitudes towards race to at least some extent. However, it arguably failed to ameliorate the plight of African Americans as its simplistic portrayal of Tom and other characters inspired a great deal of stereotypes about black people prevalent to this day – 'uncle tom' is now a pejorative directed at black people who are accused of selling out to white people, 'picaninny' was co-opted into a racial slur and contributed to a developing culture of minstrelsy, and the 'mammy' figure stereotyped black women as fat, sassy and subservient to white authority. Steinbeck's novella, with its marginally more complex characters, paints a starker picture of humanity, warts and all, as no one within the book can properly be called morally upstanding.

This places Steinbeck firmly within the context of literary realism – a movement spawned in the late 19th century in opposition to romanticism. Where romanticism emphasised idealism, the human spirit and sensitivity (in other words, things as they should be), realism instead tried to depict things as they are. The scenes explored by realism are banal and commonplace, not idealised and romantic. It attempts to capture the subtle magic of the everyday and the beauty of the commonplace in an attempt to elevate the ordinary to art. However, one could argue that Steinbeck only captured things as they were to white men; his characterisations of women and black men in the novella are certainly found wanting. He encourages us to blame Curley's wife for her own death. Crooks is portrayed as bitter in his treatment of white men because he isn't willing to indulge innocent Lennie until he feels sorry for 'torturing' him. Even Aunt Clara, entirely willing to care for Lennie until she died, is called a 'little fat old woman' and only arrives in the story to chastise Lennie for how he's an inconvenience to George.

Some have attributed his reflections on the nature of stiff upper lip, stone-faced, stoic masculinity to his reverence for his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway. Steinbeck said of

Hemingway that he was perhaps ‘the finest writer of our generation’. The feeling was not reciprocated, Hemingway routinely criticised Steinbeck as a popular writer whose novels were cheap and easy. There are a number of explanations for why this may be the case. One of the most compelling is that Hemingway was a notoriously competitive author who was determined to be the master of his craft. The other is that Steinbeck’s representation of masculinity was fundamentally found wanting in comparison to Hemingway’s presentation of the same theme (novels like *The Garden of Eden* certainly suggest that Hemingway’s relationship with the masculine identity was a good deal more complex than people have attributed to him). It is quite coherent to hold that Hemingway’s disdain for Steinbeck was justified. Many critics, including the *New York Times* and Arthur Meizner, have accused Steinbeck’s work of being superficial, sentimental, and overly moralistic. I tend to agree with this assessment. These opinions tend to rest on the distinctive lack of moral progress his characters make and how this constitutes a flaw in his use of characterisation. The ‘moral of the story’, such as it were, often takes precedence over the story itself. Additionally, Steinbeck lacks something of an original style – he borrows heavily from Hemingway but lacks the innate sense of rhythm, grace and poise that Hemingway had. For example:

“His eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a low crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. Curley stepped gingerly close to him.”

This collection of sentences is meant to demonstrate Steinbeck’s comparative lack of fluency. He ignores some of the most basic traits of good writing: he does not vary his sentence lengths, his descriptions of what is meant to be intimidating is anything but, and his prose contradicts itself. One could, in an essay, criticise his lack of technique just as easily as one could commend it. Still, it is worth noting that Steinbeck intended for the book to double as a play; such that its dialogue could be repeated on stage *verbatim* without much loss to the literary quality of the work. The descriptions of setting that precede the dialogue heavy prose can be considered akin to act and scene breaks. This also explains the extreme symmetry of the book in its 3 acts of 2 scenes each. If we view the book in this light, its lack of technical skill is no longer as much of a problem. The prose is not meant to be beautiful, but instead utilitarian. The beauty of the book lies in its plot and characters; not in its words.

All this aside, where Steinbeck might have the advantage over Hemingway is in his sheer earnestness. Steinbeck was a fierce believer in the perfectibility of men. In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, he said “I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man, has no dedication nor any membership in literature.” However, this came with a caveat. Steinbeck – in his journal – wrote that “Man will never be perfect, but he has to strive for it”. This encapsulates both the beauty and tragedy of the American Dream. One must believe in it to live, but the life one lives is often in stark contrast with what one hopes for.

It was a similar idea that motivated the poem from which Steinbeck drew his inspiration for the title of the – Robert Burns’ *To a Mouse*. The penultimate stanza – the most important to the novella – reads, in the original Scots:

*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 promis’d joy!*

Or, in its English translation:

*But Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes of mice and men
Go often askew,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!*

The three themes of the novel – loneliness, powerlessness, and dreams – are all present in this stanza.