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Migration in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

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Abstract

John Steinbeck is a famous American novelist who wins a Nobel Prize of Literature for *The Grapes of Wrath*, that deals with the suffering of migrant workers during the Great Depression. Similarly, *Of Mice and Men* reveals the same theme and suffering of Californian migrants who are victimized by economic, social and political circumstances. California functions as a setting for many of his works including *Of Mice and Men* as well as its people. This novella exposes many colorful and conflicting subjects that need investigation like the dilemma of the poor California migrants, who, despite their suffering, they triumph spiritually.

This study is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one is introductory; it gives a general introduction for the novella as well as a general background for California. Moreover, it gives a life account of John Steinbeck as well as his major works. Section two deals with the immigrants traumatic state resulted from the Great Depression and the collapse of the American dream. The last part of the study is the conclusion that sums up the results.

Keywords: migration, depression era, the American dream.

Section One

1.1 *Of Mice and Men*: Introduction

Of Mice and Men is a novella set on a farm in the Salinas valley in California during the Great Depression. Salinas's valley in particular, had an apparent influence on Steinbeck writing. *Of Mice and Men* was Steinbeck's first work, which achieved commercial success upon its release. The novella's title alludes to Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse", which was written in 1795. The poem talks about an unhappy field mouse, which builds a winter nest. It loses it and as a result the mouse died because it cannot survive the winter.

There are only few characters in *Of Mice and Men*, most of them are migrant farmers who drift about villages and ranches of Salinas's valley, they work on fields for a short time and then go on to another place, where they find a job. Steinbeck focused his writing on those workers, and portrayed them as social victims and object of pity created by the Depression (Dickstein: 122). The main protagonists of this novella are Lennie Small and George Milton. These two displaced migrant workers were united in an unlikely friendship, sharing the dream of having their own small farm. So, they have made plans for the future to achieve their dream. They find work on a ranch in Salinas's valley. They determined to remain there as long as possible in order to gather enough money to make their dream come true (Steinbeck: 16).

Lennie is gentle and kind, he does not want to hurt anyone or anything. Nonetheless, he doesn't realize his strength and also he doesn't understand abstract concepts, such as death. He likes soft things in the domestic animals, such as furs of small animals, and his attraction of their earing leads him to use so much strength and subsequently crushing them. At the end of the story Lennie accidentally killed Carley's wife the son of the ranch boss. He guesses that he has done something wrong and runs away. When Carley's wife corpse is found, men from ranch begin to search for Lennie, insisting to put an end for his life. George knows well where Lennie is hidden; he finds him and shoots him to save him from cruel treatment. George decision to shoot his friend was an act of mercy and sympathy.

However, George and Lennie symbolize something of the enduring and hope as well as the meaningless. They manage if only for a brief time

to rise above circumstances and to convince others as well as themselves that dreams are part of the territory, that all they have to do is to keep working and hoping and some day they will have their own place. If they only somehow control their weaknesses and keep a little ahead of circumstances, but they cannot (McCarthy: 102).

1.2 John Steinbeck: the man and the artist

John Steinbeck was born in 1902, in California's Salinas. He descended from German and Irish families. His father's origin was German, and he served as Monterey County treasurer. John's mother, who was an Irish, was a former school teacher. Steinbeck's interest and talents in storytelling was encouraged by his mother. Steinbeck, who grew up with three sisters, had a normal happy childhood. He was shy but clever. Steinbeck's decision to be a writer was at the age of fourteen, and at the age of sixteen, he began to send some of his short stories to magazines and newspapers. In 1919, Steinbeck started to study English literature at Stanford University in Palo Alto (Schulz and Luncheon: 4), a choice that had more to do with satisfying his parent's will, but over the next six years, Steinbeck wandered in and out of a college, leaving it without graduation.

He travelled to New York City, where he worked as a construction worker and a newspaper reporter, but then returned to California, where he worked as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe, where he completed his first novel *Cup of Gold*, and when he met his future wife Carol Henning (Ibid: 5). He worked in the fields valley in California in which he spent his summers working on nearby ranches with migrant workers, where the working men narrated their stories. These men usually worked on ranches owned by company Sprecles, which sent workers from ranch to ranch in order to help harvest crops (Timmerman: 9). During this time he understood the plight and bitterness of the Great Depression faced by the migratory working, and he became conscious of the sever condition of migrant life, which supplied him with material expressed in such works as *of Mice and Men* (Ibid).

In September 1928, Steinbeck lived for short time in San Francisco, then by the financial assistance of his father, he returned to California where he could focus his effort on writing. In 1929, he published *Cup of Gold*, which was quite well interesting (Schultz and Lunchen: 6).

During this time, Steinbeck got married and moved to Salinas to care for his ill mother. She died in 1934 and his father died in the following year, soon before Steinbeck succeeded in his first remarkable work *Tortilla Flat*. This decade witnessed Steinbeck's fame as an author. In his writings, he concentrated on economic and communal matters of rural workers during the Great Depression. At the late 1930s, he published three novels about California laboring class that became his most substantial works: *In Dubious Battle* 1936, *Of Mice and Men* 1937 and *The Grapes of Wrath* 1939. *Of Mice and Men* was his first enormous popular success, and it is also the least political of his "labour trilogy".

Steinbeck was employed by the New York Herald Tribune to report on the War II. After the end of the war, in 1945, he published *Cannery Row* a novel that also dealt with the lives of people during the Great Depression. In 1952, Steinbeck published *East of Eden*, a saga based on his own family's history set mainly in Salinas valley (Schultz and Luncheon: 7). Steinbeck wrote more than thirty books during his life, and in 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his "realistic and imaginative writing, combining as it does sympathetic humor and social perception". John Steinbeck died of heart disease on December 20, 1968. (Ibid)

1.3 Historical Background of California

The 19th Century was a century of great change in the United States. The industrialization that had started in Europe the century before, had finally reached America. The country was somehow an undeveloped country and the expectation of what could be attained was great. The land area as well as the population grew rapidly. Immigrants began to gather from various places, and new territories became incorporated, mainly through the war against Mexico or capture of land previously owned by aboriginal natives. The US enlarged itself mainly in the south, but the border was bit by bit progressed 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 and Shi: 466).

The dream of limitless land-dwelling was somehow over, but the paradise on earth was established, California. The USA had for a long time commonly consisted of sparsely populated rural landscape, but the cities

started to grow. Agriculture had also increased, and became more and more common. The evolution of the cities in addition to the agriculture led to the attentiveness of labor. Moreover, there was a remarkable progress which is the extension of the railroad. Cities became effortlessly connected to each other and this aided trade and economic growth (Ibid: 570).

In 1840s, gold was found in California, and the gold rush started in 1849 (Ibid: 461). A huge number of people came when the news of gold had spread. As a result of this evolution, new roads, schools, churches were built throughout California where immigrants settled down. The unexpected growing of cities not only created a need for new infrastructure, but also the need of appropriate laws. California was in 1850 admitted to the USA, as a free state (Tindall and Shi, 466). In the cities, big manufacturing companies had made a few people rich and turned a large amount of people into hard work labor in the search for money, the countryside became the same. Farms extended and people were employed in order to work for someone else's advantage. Individuals were seen as parts of machinery (Ahnebrink: 2).

During the thirty years after the war of 1860s, the population in California almost increased, agricultural production had doubled. The USA had changed from a rural society to a high systematized, combined, urban industrial society. The 1920s were characterized by a strong belief that things would be better (Tindall and Shi: 794). Cities industry grew, new things were invented 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. Newspapers indicated that "American citizen's first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer" (Ibid: 824). This happened during the same time as popular culture became more and more powerful, jazz, music, theatres, and movies. Women began to find a new role in society. The people had a good confidence about the future. The unexpected disaster happened in October 1929, when the worst economic tragedy in American history began, that led to a Depression era.

2.1. 1. The Great Depression, American Dream and its effect upon immigrants:

Before the 1930s, Americans were delighted in the economic success. The idea of credit _buy now, pay later was introduced and people bought everything they could. The American economy countersigned significant growth in the years after WW1 with the rise of new businesses. Inopportunately, this time of gratification and wealth would soon be over. In 1929, the United States of America faced the most severe economic downfall in history, which caused a Great Depression. The Great Depression caused great changes in the United States, it continued over a decade from 1929 to 1939. Mainly, it resulted big joblessness, which grew rapidly as people started to lose their jobs and their homes .So at that time, many people departed to the west, mostly to California, hoping to live a better life there. The sudden circumstance was very serious in agriculture. Farmers suffered from low prices for their crops before the Great Depression, so the agriculture was already in decline, as it suffered from low prices for the crops. In 1933, the unemployment rate rose to alarming 25%, which means that about 12.8 million people were out of job (Richard and Bradbury: 317). Those included 200 000 teachers, therefore 2000 schools ,especially in rural areas ,did not open .As a result ,a number of children who did not attend school reached 2.3 million (Ibid).

John Steinbeck wrote about the economic and moral result of the Depression. *Of Mice and Men* 1937 deals with the laboring class in California at that time, reflecting how the majority of Americans experienced many sufferings. However, some of them, like the characters in *Of Mice and Men*, believed that there was a chance to achieve economical success and to accomplish their American Dream. John Steinbeck portrayed the Depression as a generator that created poor and lonely people who eventually misplaced their dreams, their morality and even identity.

Being grown up in the Salinas valley ,California, and having worked as a farmer in his youth on the ranches, Steinbeck more than any other writers of his generation was equipped to deal with this pressing issue of his home state in his fictional and journalistic writings. *Of Mice and Men* describes the aimless of existence of the migrant farm workers in the Depression era that dreamed of getting it rid of.

Dreams have an essential role in the story. Every character dreams his own dream, but the dream has something in common: everyone desires to be freed from the cruel life caused by the Depression. The major dream in *Of Mice and Men*, belongs to George and Lennie, they have their own version of the American Dream: "*Someday...we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an'a cow and some pigs...*" (Steinbeck: 5)

Along the way, George and Lennie's dream becomes infectious for a number of the workers living together in the bunk house. First an old handy man named Candy offers his life savings of 350\$ to join with George and Lennie's American Dream. Then the African American stable hand, Crooks, offers to come in and work for no pay except his keep (Ibid: 75).

Candy comprehends that, one day, when he will no longer be able to accomplish his work; he will have to leave the ranch. So Candy gives his money to George and Lennie. With Candy's money, the dream is within reach. They only need to work for a month to achieve their American Dream. Nevertheless, their dream ends with Carley's wife and Lennie's death, even though Candy left some hope. Candy wants to achieve the dream with George and begs him, but it is not possible. Candy signifies the fear of truth of what will happen to elderly people who are not able to work. The fear was existing in the American Society at that time; they become out of job, out of home and suffering from lack of food too. Candy does not want to be one of those people "It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he cannot remember, into a future he cannot foresee, nor understand" (Wyatt: 57).

The American dream undoubtedly has a diverse meaning to every American citizen, for some it is the dream of freedom and equality, for others it is the dream of a pleased life or even the dream of fame or wealth. The dream undertakes equality of opportunity, no discrimination, it also included the freedom to follow goals and the promise of the possibility of wealth and success as James Truslow Adams defined it in *the Epic of America* which wrote in 1931:

"The American Dream is 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, but a dream of

social order in which each man and each woman be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are capable of, and be recognize by others for what they are, regardless of the circumstances of birth and position"(Adams: 415).

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* deals with themes like friendship and loneliness under a very problematic conditions of rural poverty during the Depression. Friendship is represented by Lennie and George, while solitude was common for most of migratory workers. George and Lennie have nothing else but their companionship and their unsuccessful labor, they are linked in one dream, as they have their secret power which is their friendship. An essential message from *Of Mice and Men* is the significance of having a friend, belong to a group. Steinbeck himself wrote in one of his letters that "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 E, and Wallsten: 76). As it was already mentioned, migrant workers were usually isolated in the society. They had no home, or no property of their own, so they dependent on the mercy of the farm owner's. Workers often go to the town to drink some alcohol, which help them to forget their harsh lives, However they spend all money they earn there, thus they deprive themselves of the chance to save money and arranged their lives.

The unusual friendship between George and Lennie became useful for them, they help each other. George cares for Lennie and tries to prevent him from getting into troubles again. Lennie is mentally naive, but extremely strong and can work hard and carry heavy things on the fields. Lennie and George are not lonely. This companionship helps them to deal with their hard situation. Unlike others migrant workers, they do not gave up even when everything feels hopeless and they still believe in better days. When George shoots Lennie at the end of the story, he knows that he will lost his only friend and be as other workers who are suffering from the loneliness, but "precisely the responsibilities of a perfect friendship require George to shoot Lennie" (Levant: 75).

Of Mice and Men presents a conflict between classes appeared obviously. The lower class immigrants represented by Lennie, George and

other workers, while power and higher class is portrayed at Curley and his wife. This struggle leads to a disaster. Carley is a perfect example of how ownership spoils people. He is the son of the manager of the farm, he is short ,thin young man with a brown face, brown eyes and curly hair and he always wears high heeled boots in order to become different from other workers at the ranch . As he is short, so he hates big men and always tries to pick fight with them to prove his masculinity (Steinbeck: 28).

Carley married an attractive woman to prove himself. He tries to command her and wants her to stay inside the house. Also he threatens the ranch workers with a fight if they think of talking to her. When Lennie accidentally kills Carley's wife and Carley sees her corpse, he does not reveal any grief or sorrow for her. The first thing that comes in his mind is that he has to catch and kill her murderer. Curley does not call for justice; he calls for revenge. Curley's wife is a complex character. She is lonely and dissatisfied. Yet being the wife of the boss's son, she is a reprehensive of economic power. Curley's wife gained her position through her marriage and she is aware of her power. As it is showed in her conversation with Crooks in his room. In her speech Curley's wife reminds Crooks of his place and wants him to show her proper respect as a white woman and the wife of Curley ,the boss's son "Listen, Negger you know what I can do to you if you open your trap", (Steinbeck: 80), and she says to him "well, you keep your place then, Negger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (Ibid).

Another type of power is represented by Slim. He is the authority and the natural leader at the ranch, respected even by Carley. Slim is very good at his job of a mule driver, and everybody asks Slim for advice. His high position is evident from the description given when he enters the bunk house for the first time. Slim is reprehensive of a good power that naturally belongs to him. Slim stimulates confidence in other people and that is why he is the only person George confesses to his and Lennie's past. When there is a fight between Lennie and Carley and Lennie smashes Curley's hand, Slim makes Curley lie about what happened, and tells him to say that he got his hand in a machine to help Lennie and George. Slim surly is one of the more enigmatic figures, His description by the narrator leads Louis Owens to conclude that Slim is "An omnipotent and omniscient sort of Nietzschean superman" and "The familiar American cowboy here"

(Owens: 222). Even the boss's son, Carley, treats Slim with respect, acknowledging his distinctive leadership "authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love" (ibid: 37). This shows that Slim's power lies through gaining the respect from others, even if he is a poor migrant worker.

So many workers didn't have stable work because it depends on the California's growers who needed thousands of workers to pick fruit or chop cotton. But when the growers no longer required them, the agricultural immigrants were probable dismissed. They were forced to travel continually, as one migrant child said "when they need us they call us migrant, and when we have picked their crops, we're bums and we got to get out" (Steinbeck: 1). But for many people there was no job to move to.

Steinbeck literary career glowed in the beginning of the Great Depression and, for many opinions of Steinbeck's scholars', he achieved a greatness in his Californian laboring trilogy for reflecting the migrant workers suffering at the Depression era. "Steinbeck was still a struggling writer, but his literary fortune soon changed when he began to engage with California's migrant farm labour issue". (Robert S and McElvaine: 41).

Conclusion

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* marked an important phase in his career. It was his first work, which received commercial success upon its issuing. *Of Mice and Men* is a novella that is interlaced by valuable themes and simple story to tell at the same time. The majority of the events go round the lower class central immigrants, George and Lennie and their unfulfilled dream which refers to the collapse of the American dream. They, in fact, embody the majority of migrant workers during 1930s who are victims of the Depression era.

Steinbeck uses few characters in *Of Mice and Men*, most of them are migrant farmers who roam villages and ranches of Salinas's valley in order to find a temporal job. They work on fields for a short time and then go on to another place. Steinbeck focused his writing on those traumatic workers,

and depicted them as a social and economic victims and object of pity created by the Depression era.

Steinbeck depicts a warm story of two characters who totally different from each other, but at the same time can find something essential in life in each other. The author wants to convey a message of friendship in a time of crisis where migrant workers has hard times.

Of Mice and Men includes a critique on American Mythology and failure of the American Dream. George and Lennie are an evidence that everybody cannot gain wealth 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.

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