

ANALYSIS

Of Mice and Men (1937)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“*Of Mice and Men* [is] a short novel which Steinbeck tried to make like a play, and of which he produced also a version for the state the same year. There was something theatrical as well as pitiful in the moron Lennie who is dependent on his friend George, but there was also an aching timeliness in the plans they make to have somewhere a small farm of their own and be secure. The novels of the prosperous twenties had perpetually ridiculed people who desired no more than enough to eat and a place to sleep. A novel of the depressed and unemployed thirties could make touching heroes of men for whom such desires were now Utopian.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1779-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 364-65

“George Milton and Lennie Small, itinerant farm laborers, come to work on a Salinas Valley ranch in central California. Lennie has tremendous strength but a feeble intellect, and possesses a morbid desire to handle soft objects. George compensates for Lennie’s deficiencies by exploiting his strength and cherishing their mutual dream of a small farm of their own. Curley, son of the boss, is an arrogant bully whose bride’s promiscuity has already caused quarrels among the farmhands. When jealousy prompts him to pick a fight with Lennie, he emerges with a crushed hand, and his wife begins to admire the unwilling Lennie. She seeks a pretext to be alone with him, and one day in the hayloft tries to arouse his desire. He begins to stroke her hair, and, when she resists, he accidentally breaks her neck. He flees to the river, planning to escape. George and a friend discover the body, and George hurriedly follows, ahead of a mob led by the enraged Curley. Finding Lennie beside a secluded pool, George calms his fears with the frequently repeated description of the farm of their hopes, and shoots him in the head.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 552

“Jeffersonian agrarianism...was essentially democratic: it insisted on the widespread ownership of property, on political and economic independence, on individualism; it created a society in which every individual had status; it made the dignity of man something more than a political slogan.... *Of Mice and Men* shows clearly Steinbeck’s interest in agrarianism, even though he is still haunted by psychological abnormality. In this latter book we have the disenchanting and disinheriting if not the dispossessing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Lennie and George, migratory workers in the California fields, cherish the dream of a little farm of their own where, as Lennie’s refrain has it, they can ‘live off the fatta the lan’.

George yearns for his own place where he could bring in his own crops, where he could get what comes up out of the ground. He wants the full reward of his own labor. He wants the independence that partnership can give him. Nobody could fire him if the farm were his. If someone came he didn’t like, he could say, ‘Get the hell out,’ and by God he’s got to do it.’ They would produce all they could eat, and then: ‘We’d jus’ live there. We’d belong there.... We’d have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house.’ A stake in society and status in society—these give men the dignity that is rightfully theirs in a democracy. Productive property, Steinbeck seems to suggest, is a real restorative. Even Candy, the used up sweeper, and Crooks, the misshapen Negro, are reinvigorated by the prospect of ownership and stability. *Of Mice and Men*, however, was a sentimental and slight book. Three years later, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was able to present a fuller exposition of his agrarian views.”

Chester E. Eisinger
“Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath*”

“*Of Mice and Men* is unsatisfactory because it tries to squeeze tragedy out of characters who lack tragic stature and in Lennie’s case even human significance. The dream of the little piece of land is as sentimental as anything on a colored calendar; even George admits that, if once he were delivered from the burden one cannot believe he would ever have assumed, he would only take his fifty ‘bucks’ to the ‘cat house.’ Here the sweet simplicities of the Friendship Village school turn to a glorification of idiocy, and James T. Farrell is quite just when he declares that *Of Mice and Men* has ‘all the mannerisms and none of the substance of genuine realistic writing’.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 446

“*Of Mice and Men* is a folk tragedy laid in the setting of a California ranch. To the ranch come George Milton, an impractical but intelligent and hard-working laborer, and Lennie Small, his strong, half-witted, and gentle companion. The pair have formed a sort of tacit partnership: George protects Lennie from the pitfalls of a clever and unscrupulous society, and Lennie puts his enormous strength at George’s disposal. The pair meet Candy, a decrepit old man who has managed to save a few dollars through the years, and the three enter into a sentimental partnership to retire and buy a little ranch of their own. Candy is to furnish the money, George the brains, and Lennie the brute strength. Their dream occupies their entire attention; they can talk of nothing else. Soon it becomes a kind of drug which makes their hard life bearable.

Lennie, however, comes to disaster in a moment when George is not there to protect him. Curley, the conceited young ranch owner’s son, has married a flirtatious young woman who is a continual source of trouble on the ranch. The wife, bored, dabbles with Lennie; she is fascinated by his strength and tries her seductive tricks on him. Lennie, bewildered, crushes her like an egg without knowing what he is doing. He is aware he has done something wrong, and, afraid George will punish him, he stumbles away in flight. George, however, tracks him down and finds him before the posse reaches him, and kills him with a revolver as he lulls him with tales of their dream ranch.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 233-34

“*Of Mice and Men* (1937) seems on a rereading to stand up remarkably well, to stand up whole and intact. It skirts breathtakingly close to disastrous sentimentality; stock minor characters (especially the villain and the villainess) move woodenly through it; the deliberate stage technique gives one the cramps; and there is an unpersuasive quality of contrivance about the episode—the mercy-shooting of an aged dog—which prepares by analogy for the climax—the mercy-shooting of the animal-child, Lennie. Yet the entire action of the story moves to its own rhythm, rescued and redeemed by a sort of wishful toughness, a sense not of realism but of reality. The end is an authentic purgation of feeling, pity if not terror, and the end crowns the whole. *Of Mice and Men* is probably the only one of Steinbeck’s works which is satisfying as a whole, and it is a short novel or *novella*.”

R. W. B. Lewis
“John Steinbeck: The Fitful Daemon”
The Young Rebel in American Literature, ed. Carl Bode
(Heinemann & Praeger 1959)

“*Of Mice and Men*, a novel by John Steinbeck, dramatized by the author the same year. As Steinbeck wrote this short novel ‘like a play,’ the dramatic unities are apparent throughout. The plot concerns George and his powerful, simple-minded friend Lennie, casual laborers who travel from one ranch to another, dreaming constantly of a place of their own. Written with great compassion and simplicity, *Of Mice and Men* was an outstanding success as a novel; as a drama it won the Drama Critics Circle Award for 1937. It was also made into a film (1939).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

“Steinbeck is at his best as a novelist when he is dealing with human beings living at something approaching the animal level. These are made acceptable and indeed moving because of the genuine sweetness one feels in Steinbeck's nature and because he sees these human beings as being at least as dignified as animals. He doesn't, in other words, reduce them... One sees this in the short novel *Of Mice and Men*, which only fails to be a small masterpiece because of the unconvincing nature of Lennie's hallucinations in the final chapter. In one sense, of course, in its picture of the relationship between two ranch hands, George the little guy and Lennie the feeble-minded giant whom he protects, *Of Mice and Men* is another example of what might be called the eternal American 'buddy novel'...

What is bound to happen, cannot come as a surprise: we know that Lennie, who loves soft small things and kills mice and puppies by accident, not knowing his own strength, will certainly kill a girl in the same way before the book ends.... From the beginning, from the page in which Lennie comes into the action, he is associated, we see him, with some small soft helpless animal; and in the end these small soft helpless animals symbolize Lennie himself. He may be a giant in physique but, all the same, in essence, he too is a small soft helpless animal doomed to be killed like one. Mice and men, if not identical in Steinbeck's view, are at least interchangeable.

Of Mice and Men is a pathetic story of human beings at what is almost the lowest level of articulateness, to be distinguished from animals mainly, perhaps, by their capacity to dream, though what they dream can never be fulfilled in reality. The dream is the same as that which motivates the 'Okies' in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the dispossessed sharecroppers of Oklahoma who pour in their broken-down old cars across the mountains and the desert into the rich valleys of California, the promised land.”

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 163-64

“Set in California's fertile Salinas Valley, *Of Mice and Men* introduces George, a cattle-ranch hand, and his friend Lennie, a blundering simpleton. In their loneliness and alienation these two men cherish the uncertain bonds between them; they also share the ambition of saving enough money to buy a plot of land. The incidents that lead to the downfall of their hopes are worked into one of American literature's most powerful and moving stories.”

Advertisement
East of Eden by John Steinbeck
(Penguin 1979)

Michael Hollister (2015)