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## Subject Area - English

### Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck.

John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*, was first published in 1937. At the time, America was still suffering the grim aftermath of the depression and the itinerant workers who form the basis of the novel were very much within the consciousness of a nation separated by wealth yet driven by the idea of 'the American dream'. Steinbeck's novel is, however, essentially a tale of loneliness, of men struggling alone against a cold, uncaring and faceless destiny.

The central protagonists, George and Lennie are, as they are proud to proclaim, different from the others because they have each other. They are an odd couple, George the shrewd, wiry yet ultimately caring protector of the ironically named Lennie Small, who is, in fact, a huge man who doesn't know his own strength and is mentally incapable of making the smallest of decisions for himself; he relies on George completely but equally, George needs Lennie as he gives him a reason to keep going. Lennie, despite his lack of intellect, senses this because when he knows George feels guilty for being angry with him, he takes advantage of the moment to manipulate George into repeating the story of their 'dream future', especially the rabbits they intend to keep with which Lennie is obsessed.

They are not related but Lennie's aunt has brought up George and he has promised her that he will look after Lennie, now she has died. The secret dream they share, of building a life together on a ranch and 'liv[ing] off the fatta the lan' is central but the very title of the book, taken from Robert Burns' poem 'To a Mouse' foreshadows the ultimate defeat of their dream, since it speaks of plans going wrong.

The two men are en route for another in a series of ranch jobs, having been run out of Weed, the place where they previously lived and worked, because Lennie has been wrongly accused of attempted rape because of his innocent desire to touch the material of a girl's skirt; again there is foreshadowing here of the tragic ending of the novel. Indeed, the whole of the book follows the circular movement established by the setting of the beginning of the novel and inverting descriptions used there in the ending which takes place in the same spot, where Lennie has been warned to return if anything goes wrong which inevitably it does.

Upon arrival at the ranch, Steinbeck takes the opportunity to introduce the reader, via the newcomers, to a panoply of characters, all loners for one reason or another: the old, maimed and dispirited Candy, the black, crippled and isolated Crooks, the feisty and arrogant boss's son, Curley, who is newly and unhappily married, his wife being what the others call a 'tramp', and the god-like Slim, to whom all the others look up and to whom they all look for an image to idolise. Steinbeck uses each of these in a different way to show facets of loneliness and isolation, with only Slim seeming beyond the idea that he is an object of pity.

From the first, George is afraid that the aggressive boss's son, Curley, will cause trouble for himself and Lennie because he is an amateur boxer who sees Lennie's size as a challenge and is 'handy'. However, when he is involved in a violent incident with Curley through no fault of his own, Lennie crushes his hand and Slim warns him that if anything is said about it, he will make Curley look a fool, the thing he knows Curley fears most.

Indeed, Steinbeck perpetually uses Slim as his centre of consciousness in the novel, the man in whom

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George confides, in a carefully choreographed 'confessional' scene, for example, where even the lighting reflects the intense interrogative. Slim is also the only one of the men who appears to have any kind of relationship with Crooks. It is no coincidence, either, that it is Slim who comforts and consoles George at the end of the book, telling him 'You hadda, George. I swear you hadda' and leading him away.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Steinbeck's novel is undoubtedly his portrayal of women. The only female character to have a real presence in the book is Curley's wife, who appears to have married Curley on a whim, having been disappointed in her ludicrous ambition to become a film star, and is already clearly on the lookout for a better prospect. She flirts with the men, is clearly attracted to Slim, and abuses Crooks, emphasising as she does this the racial tensions of the time. The other references to women are to prostitutes and Lennie's late aunt, rather oddly sharing a name with the local 'madam' of the brothel. Steinbeck here lays himself open to the charge of sexism, especially since in other works such as *East of Eden*, which he wrote in 1952, women are similarly portrayed as an entrapment to men, perhaps indicating a connective with difficulties in his personal life.

In conclusion, however, it must be said that the enduring appeal of Steinbeck's powerful novel remains intrinsically the moving realisation of the central relationship between George and Lennie and how their rather coincidental coming together becomes for both the defining emotion of their lives. Precisely because there are two of them, that someone, as George says, 'gives a damn', Steinbeck is able to highlight the loneliness of the itinerant drifters of whom he also writes movingly in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The sharing of their dream with the desperate Candy is in a sense the beginning of the end because as it becomes almost a reality it is simultaneously broken by the intrusion of possibility symbolised by him. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck made a nationwide problem human and in doing so, he created characters who continue to both move and disturb.

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