

A Marxist Perspective to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

UNE PERSPECTIVE MARXISTE SUR *OF MICE AND MEN* DE JOHN STEINBECK

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Abstract: this article focuses on the obvious elements of social protest in the novel from the Marxist perspective: the plight of migrant workers, a theme that is later developed more fully in Steinbeck's masterpiece *the Grapes of Wrath* (1939); racial discrimination and the social prejudice towards women. Elements of social protest, however, are slight when compared with the more universal message of the story, a lack underscored by the fact that the characters have no visible social awareness of their situation and the cause-source for that. Therefore, the article goes into further study on the cause-source for the miserable situation of the migrant workers and other lower-class people. It comes to the conclusion that the social system is to blame and be responsible for the sufferings of the characters.

Key words: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, Marxist perspective, social protest

Résumé: Ce texte se focalise sur les éléments évidents de la protestation sociale dans la nouvelle dans une perspective marxiste : la situation difficile des travailleurs migrants, un thème qui est ensuite développé plus profondément dans le chef-d'oeuvre « *the Grapes of Wrath* » (1939) de John Steinbeck ; la discrimination de race et le préjugé social envers les femmes. De toute façon, la protestation sociale des éléments sont légères par rapport au message universel de l'histoire, la manque soulignée par le fait que les héros ne sont pas visiblement conscients de leur situation ainsi que la cause-source. Par conséquent, ce texte fait des études plus approfondies sur la cause-source de la situation misérable des travailleurs-migrants, et les autres gens les plus démunis de la société. Il conclut enfin que le système social se doit être critiqué et qu'il est responsable pour la souffrance des héros.

mots-clés: John Steinbeck, *De Mice and Men*, perspective marxiste, protestation sociale

John Steinbeck is a writer who voiced his deep sympathy for the poor and the oppressed, especially the migrant workers. Though nostalgic for the lost and primitive is felt in his writings, he nevertheless presents a majestic history through portraying believable characters. Since his return to California in 1930's, he learned to know the poor, in particular the migrant farm-workers, American and Mexican, and he wrote

from their point of view. His subject is mainly concerned to draw a true picture of these people.

Of Mice and Men is a touching and perennially popular tale of two migrants and their mutual dependence and shared dreams. It vividly exposes the miserable situation of this peculiar class. It first came out in 1937 as a novel and soon afterwards was adapted by its author for the stage. Steinbeck was given the 1937's New York Drama Critic Award, which honored him for

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handling a theme genuinely rooted in American life.

There are obvious elements of social protests in the novel: the plight of migrant workers, a theme that is later developed more fully in *the Grapes of wrath* (1939); racial discrimination, revealed in the abuse and ostracizing of Crooks, the black stableman, by the other ranch hands; the insensitive treatment of old Candy and the social prejudice towards women, exposed through Curly's wife's unhappy married life. Elements of social protests, however, are slight when compared with the more universal message of the story, a lack underscored by the fact that the characters have no visible social awareness of their situation and the cause-source for that.

The migrant workers as George and Lennie are deprived of their land just as the mice deprived of their homes during the industrialization of the U.S. in the 1930's. They become the proletarian class whose labor-power the capitalists buy for profit, because the capitalist class owns those means of production. They are heavily exploited by the capitalists, because such kind of economic structure decides the situation in which one class has power over the others. But this structure is either seen by most members of society as natural or not seen at all. Therefore, although George and Lennie are innocent and hard-working men, they still can't earn enough money to settle themselves down and enjoy the elementary family life. Although they are real farmers whose life is closely attached to the land, they don't have a piece of land of their own. Whereas Curly, who never works on the land, is the owner of the land.

Yearning for land is the theme of the novel. Lennie is a symbol of the primeval and fundamentally innocent yearning for the earth that is found in all men. He dreams of finding his peace tending rabbits on a ranch of his own all the time and keeps on requiring George to describe the dream and reinforce it. Twice, he expresses a desire to lose himself in a cave when he realizes that he has done some bad things. Lennie happily retains the dream until the very end. George asks him to look across the river and to listen as he describes the scene so vividly that Lennie will actually see it. When Lennie exclaims, "I can see it, George, I can see it! Right over there! I can see it!" George shoots him. Lennie lives and dies in that dream. It is also Lennie who keeps that dream alive in George. In other words, George must have Lennie in order to have the ranch. He is however, somewhat conscious of their situation. He believes, however, on the surface that without Lennie he could get along much better: "God almighty, if I was alone, I could live so easy. I could go get a job of work and no trouble, no mess... and when the end of the month come, I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and do whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat-house all night, I could eat any place I want, order any damn thing." George may believe that he could get along better, but without Lennie, the hope of buying a farm of his own would be gone. After Lennie kills Curly's wife,

and George kills Lennie for fear that his friend would suffer more in Curly's hands, George realizes that the dream has indeed ended. He shows his frustration to Candy: "I'll work any month and then I'll take my fifty bucks. I'll stay all night in some lousy cat-house or I'll set in a pool room until everybody goes home. And then I'll have fifty bucks more." His life offers little now but the promise of monotonous routine. He no longer even has the promise of the dream to look forward to. When George kills Lennie, he kills that part of himself that believed the dream could come true. The pattern of George's character develops downward from hope and optimism to despair, so is the fate of other migrants. Just as Crooks said that the dream of getting a ranch is in the minds of hundreds of migrants, but nobody ever gets it.

Because of their lower social and economic position, proletarians have no strong political power; they are weak in every aspect. Capitalists in the novel are strong, not because they are the best, but only because of their superior economic position. From the very beginning, it is evident that the capitalist world is very cruel to poor migrant workers, especially to characters like Lennie and Candy. One is innocent and lacks intelligence; the other is old and disabled. Lennie's obsessive attraction to soft and furry things not only reveals his sensitivity and innocence, but also shows his longing for mild and delicate things in a kind of very tough life. In the beginning of the story, Lennie carries a dead mouse in his jacket pocket. When George asks what he wants with a dead mouse, Lennie replies that he only wants to pet it with his thumb as they walk. The mouse symbolizes the theme of innocence and frailty destroyed that pervades the novel. Reference to it establishes in the story a symbolic motif that reappears in the dog, Curly's wife, and Lennie's dream of tending rabbits on the ranch that he and George will buy someday.

When Candy's dog is shot by Carlson, he begins to realize his own situation. He is as old as the dog and useless for the boss now. His fate may be even worse than the dog's. He has to be left alone in this world to suffer from old age, poverty and loneliness. He offers his money paid by the boss when he lost his hand on the ranch to George and Lennie only if they could bring him to live with them when they get a ranch. He says miserably: "You seen what they come to my dog tonight? They says he wasn't no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody'd shoot me. But they won' do nothing like that. I won't have no place to go, an' I can't get no more jobs." His last hope is to form a bond of comradeship with George and Lennie when they buy the farm, a hope that is shattered by Lennie's death. The old dog vividly symbolizes the situation of the frail and the old. Neither of them can survive in this cruel society. When Carlson leads the old dog out and shoots him in the back of the head with the Luger that George will later use to shoot Lennie, and like the dog Lennie is also shot with the same pistol in the back of the head, the motif of the destruction of the innocent, the frail and the old is repeated and creates a

shocking effect in readers' hearts. There is simply no place for these lower classes, non-self-sufficient people in this man-eating-man society.

There is no place for the black in the racial discrimination society, too. The black stableman Crooks not only suffers from poverty and the lack of home as the other migrants, but also suffers from the lack of companionship. Yearning for companionship is another theme in this story. George and Lennie are like a man and his shadow. But they are very different from each other. One is small, and the other is big. One is wise; the other is slow. But they never separate from each other. The reason is simply because they need each other. Just as George says, migrant people are the loneliest people in the world, because they have to move from place to place for job. As soon as they get familiar with the environment, they start to move. They have no friends, not even neighbors. George and Lennie feel that they are different from others just because they have each other to look after. They can talk to each other and share dreams with each other. Crooks is the loneliest person on the ranch. He is not permitted to play cards with the white hands. He shuts himself in his shed because the whites say he stinks. He envies George's good fortune at being able to share his life with Lennie, even though Lennie is a half-wit. He becomes proud and aloof, keeps his distance and demands that other people keep theirs. Yet in his heart, he is yearning for companionship, for someone to talk to. So when Lennie once happens to rush into his shed for his puppy when all the other men have gone down town, he is so happy to talk to Lennie about his family history, although the latter can't understand him at all. He describes his loneliness to Lennie: "... Suppose you didn't have nobody, suppose you couldn't go into the bunkhouse and play rummy' cause you was black. How'd you like that? Suppose you had to sit out here and read books. Sure you could play horse shoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody — be near him." He whined, "a guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," he then cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely and he gets sick." Loneliness almost drives him mad.

There is no place for Curly's wife either. She is frail because of the social prejudice towards women.

She even has no name; she is always "Curly's wife". She is married to Curly by mistake. There is no love to base their marriage at all. Curley does not respect her. He is a domineering and brutal husband. She has no position either in her family or in society. She is regarded as flirtatious by the ranchmen. But she is never as "bad" as they think. They object to her not because she is a tart, (these are the men, remember, who spend weed-ends at old Susy's place), but because she is a threat. She is overshadowed by her husband, who is also the boss's son. The men are afraid of Curley because he may have them fired and because he is also a vicious character prone to fighting. Curly means trouble, not his wife. But Curley is strong. So everyone avoids Curley's wife and no one really understands her. She has been forced into this environment and is made to live in a way that is alien to her frail nature. All that she really desires is to have someone to talk to and to be taken dancing occasionally. When George calls her a tart, she replies, "I got nobody to talk to. I got nobody to be with. Think I can just sit home and do nothing but cook for Curley? I want to see somebody. Just see them and talk to them." It costs her life at last, for a kind of communication. It is very ironic that Curley's wife, an innocent, should be killed by Lennie, another innocent. But it must be remembered that Lennie puts his hand over her face to keep her from screaming because he is afraid of angering George by doing another "bad" thing. The thing is only to stroke her hair which is furry. In a sense, he therefore acts to protect himself and George from those social forces. But it proves that he is too weak to do so. Neither can Curley's wife protect herself. The old man Candy and the black stableman Crooks are all doomed to suffer because of the social system. Even George, who, somewhat understands his environment but has no way out, is doomed to destruction. He can no longer hold on to the dream of buying a piece of land and there is no hope left to him. Just as he predicts, he will grow old working for fifty dollars a month and visiting "old Susy's" until, someday, he will be too broken to work, and then, like Candy and the old dog, he too will be "shot away." Only the Curleys and the rich and brutal are protected by that society. They will survive and prosper because they are strong economically and politically in that society.

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