

# Projection of Loneliness in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

S.Suruthi

M.A., B.Ed., SLET. Research Scholar  
, Bharathiyar Arts and Science College (W), Deviyakurichi.

## Abstract:

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a powerful book, for its simplicity, for its moving quality and for many other reasons. This article will be focused on the analysis of the loneliness, the kind of relationship between George and Lennie, the main protagonists, and the role their dream plays in their lives as a way to escape the society they live in. This need to escape is shared by other characters as well. It is indeed this strange situation that celebrates the loneliness as an inevitable part of human life.

**Key words:** lonely, escape, relationship, society, marginalization, aloof, solitaire

John Ernst Steinbeck (1902-1968) was one of the most popular American writers. His works had a profound effect on the American people. Today, he is considered as a leading literary figure because he wrote largely out of his own experience, but unlike most of his contemporaries, throughout his career, John Steinbeck championed the working class and other marginalized people, making their stories visible to an international audience. Steinbeck is a versatile writer. He has been described as a social-protest writer, a realist, a naturalist, a journalist, and a playwright. He has many strong themes running through his works. The most notable are the strengths of the family, the effects of the environment on man, and social protest. He experimented with many different writing styles and points of view. All of these factors combine to explain why Steinbeck is still a literary force to-day. Whatever his experience in fiction or journalistic prose, he wrote with empathy, charity, and perspicuity: "In every bit of honest writing in the world," he noted in 1938 journal entry, "... 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" (14).

Most of the novels of John Steinbeck deal with various kinds of human relationships. Human relationships found in the novels of John Steinbeck are unique, extraordinary and realistic. In his literary form and expression and plot construction, Steinbeck tries to bring new techniques and styles. Because of his unique style of writings, complicated human relationships and themes of universal importance, his works are remarkable. The Projection of Loneliness in *Of Mice and Men*, Loneliness is an inevitable part of human life. Every one becomes lonely once in a while but in Steinbeck's novel *Of*

*Mice and Men*, he illustrates the loneliness of ranch life in the early 1930s and shows how people are driven to try and find friendship in order to escape from loneliness. Steinbeck creates a lonely and blue atmosphere often in the book. He uses names and words such as the town near the ranch called Soledad, which means loneliness and the card game, Solitaire, Which means by one self. He makes it clear that all the men on the ranch are lonely, with particular people lonelier than others. In the opening chapter, Steinbeck introduces the idea of loneliness and men who work on ranches living temporary lives, with no aim in life. Steinbeck uses the setting to convey these ideas. The way Steinbeck describes the bunkhouse indicates their lonely lives. Also by only having two shelves for their personal belongings shows their lonely insecure lives. However, there are particular people in the ranch who have lonelier lives than others. The loneliest person on the ranch has to be Crooks, who suffers from extreme loneliness because he is black and he is living in a ranch and the surrounding area is very racist. He lives by himself, because the other men do not like him. He does not take part in any of the social activities in the ranch and is left out completely. He is so lonely that he turns to books, which soon becomes boring and he will become lonely again. He is so desperate for company and for someone to talk, even though he does not really show it. When Lennie came into his room he just talked and does not care if Lennie is listening or not, because he is so desperate. George and Lennie have something which all the men on the ranch envy and that is friendship. Crooks calls Lennie nuts and does not believe that Lennie will own his own land with George and Candy. He exclaims, "An ' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. It's just in their head" (Steinbeck 106). This shows that he has no hope for the future and that he has no belief in men from that ranch going to heaven or a better place.

After George killed Lennie, it seems that he would have a better life without him, but really he would have a worse life and would turn out like the other ranch workers. He will suffer from loneliness and will have no true friends. Of course, his dream will never come true as he could not proceed with it without Lennie.

Steinbeck portrays the duality of loneliness perfectly through the character of George. This duality is represented by viewing loneliness as a blessing and in opposition to a blessing. In gaining liberation from Lennie, George would liberate himself from a burden. This loneliness would grant George the freedom to "live so easy and maybe have a girl" (9). On the contrary, the liberation would bring about loneliness as caused by the loss of a companion. Clinging onto Lennie, who is emotionally dependent on him, makes George realize that he is needed. In effect, Lennie's dependency on George affirms his own existence. The relationship between Lennie and George proves to be beneficent as it protects them from outside danger, "Because I've got you and you got me to look after you" (15).

Lennie and George represent a rare kind of friendship of which the other lonely and isolated people on the ranch can only dream of Crooks, the black stable buck represents Steinbeck's duality of loneliness in the sense that he demands loneliness, but also suffers from it. This duality is also one that traces Steinbeck's own experience of loneliness. Crooks represent an ambiguity about isolation. Though it is easy to simplify his attitude to loneliness in this duality, one must acknowledge the fact that Crooks' loneliness is not something he chooses, but something that he grows accustomed to. As

an example of this habit, Crooks utters: “You got no right to come into my room. This here’s my room. Nobody got the right to be here but me” (67-68). Crooks epitomises a person who with experience grows comfortable with his own isolation and any means of contact creates an offense. As Meyer states: “[Crooks] resigns [due to] the lack of acceptance he experiences from his fellow farmhands” (299). This implies that Crooks is not perceived as equal amongst the farm workers and is therefore ostracized and confined to his own room within the bunkhouse.

Steinbeck’s duality of loneliness is clearly displayed in the character of Candy when he enters Crooks’ room. It would occur that Candy is jealous of the privacy that Crooks’ enjoys by having his own place. But what he does not realize is that privacy is also the cause of the loneliness inflicted on Crooks. Candy says to Crooks, “You got a nice cozy place here...must be nice to have a room all to yourself this way” (74). Candy, being a Caucasian farmhand, does not realize that by Crooks having his own place he is under a curse of loneliness. Crooks retorts to Candy’s comment by saying: “Sure...and a manure pile underneath the window. Sure it’s swell” (74). Crooks doesn’t view his loneliness as means of comfort and privacy. He sees that by having his own room he is being kept away from the other farm workers and therefore made an outcast. Crooks’ segregation and overall cold attitude makes it hard for other farmhands to approach him.

Curley’s wife is the only isolated woman in the novel. The first reason that arises out of context is that by her being the only woman on the ranch, she stands alone in the representation of her own sex. Her isolation is predetermined automatically, since her only way to seek company is to speak to men. Curley’s wife is trapped in her own gender as the male farmhands presume her actions are merely a sexual quest. Upon Lennie and George’s arrival on the ranch Candy mentions: “I seen her give Slim the eye...An’ I seen her give Carlson the eye” (29). Throughout the book, Curley’s wife is deemed a “tart” (29), a “bitch” (33) and a “floozy” (78). With ease it can be said, that Curley’s wife is trapped in her own sexuality without any possible escape. By explanation, Curley’s wife emphasises her sexuality, “She had full, rouged lips, and wide spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her finger nails were red” (32). Steinbeck, himself, provides in *Life in Letters* a background on Curley’s wife: “No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because one finds her sexually desirable” (154).

When talking to Lennie, Curley’s wife opens up about being lonely “Why can’t I talk to you. I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely” (Steinbeck 85). Curley’s wife is emotionally starved and her husband is incapable of providing any consolation. It is Curley that restricts his wife from communicating with the farm workers, therefore pushing her aside: “I can’t talk to nobody but Curley, else he gets mad” (85). The whole novel follows the rat race between Curley and his wife, where they are constantly looking for each other. Curley’s wife seeks her husband only as an excuse to start a conversation. On the other hand Curley looks for his wife as he is convinced she is cheating on him. It is this unhealthy feeling which occupies the married couple and causes the isolation of both.

The duality of loneliness that Steinbeck has managed to put forward in *Of Mice and Men* is telling of his philosophical conviction. In a letter to his editor, Pascal Covici in 1941, he writes “ It seems fairly obvious that two sides of a mirror are required before one has a mirror, that two forces are necessary in man before he is a man” (221). With this, Steinbeck means to explain the diversity of the human character. The ambiguity of attitude and emotions is vividly shown in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck’s characters are not flat, instead they represent entities in which two sides are in conflict. Crooks fights with the concept of race segregation, but also values his loneliness. Curley’s wife is in conflict with her own gender, but at the same time she plays with it. Candy sticks to his old dog, but at the same time knows that killing his dog would relieve its pain. George is in conflict whether to value his friendship or seek freedom in loneliness. Lennie is at conflict with his own self, by not being able to decide for himself. It is indeed this strange situation that celebrates Steinbeck’s own inner fight with isolation and loneliness.

### Work Cited

Bloom, Harold. *Of Mice and Men: Bloom’s Notes*. New York: Chelsea House, 1996. Print.

Hart, Richard E. “Steinbeck on Man and Nature.” *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. ed. Susan Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007. Print.  
<<http://www.fofweb.com/>>.

Shillinglaw, Susan. “Introduction: A Steinbeck Scholar’s Perspective.” *Steinbeck and the Environment*. ed. Susan Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw. London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997. Print.

Shillinglaw, Susan. *John Steinbeck, American Writer*. Web. 21 Aug 2008.  
<<http://www.steinbeck.sjsu.edu/briefbiography.jsp/>>.

Shillinglaw, Susan. *Thoughts on John Steinbeck’s Spirituality*. Web. 05. Sep, 2014.  
<<http://www.steinbeckinstitute.org/spirituality.html/>>

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. London: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*. New York: Penguin, 1990. Print.

Steinbeck, John and Edward F. Ricketts. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. New York: Viking Press, 1951. Print.

Umadevi V, and Saranya V.M. “Economic Crisis in the Novel of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2.7 (2016): 53-55. Print.