

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue-3 (June 2021)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor : Dr. Madhuri Bite



www.the-criterion.com



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Ambition and Aftermath: The Collapse of the American Dream in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Shubhajit Nayak
Ravenshaw University,
Cuttack, Odisha, India.

Article History: Submitted-24/05/2021, Revised-16/06/2021, Accepted-18/06/2021, Published-30/06/2021.

Abstract:

John Steinbeck's novels are the perfect and just representation of the American society during the dark and turbulent era of The Great Depression of the 1930s. In his 1937 novel title *Of Mice and Men* he depicted the disconsolate and despondent life of poor ranch labourers. It deals with George and Lennie, two friends and ranch labourers wandering here and there in search of employment and at the same time, despite of being working class people, they carry with them the dream of becoming rich by owning a ranch of their own. This research paper explores the disillusionment of the American working-class workers in their pursuit of the American Dream during the backdrop of The Great Depression. Apart from these two characters there are other characters who also possess similar unattainable dreams. Thus, this research paper attempts to analyse the failure of the hollow American dreams of various characters of the novel and critically analyses three kinds of American Dreams found in the novel. First is the dream of owning a ranch being seen by the character George and Candy. Second is the dream of equality being portrayed through the character Crook. Third is the dream of personal fulfilment which is portrayed through the character of Lennie and Curly's Wife.

Keywords: Great Depression, American Dream, Disillusionment, Minorities, John Steinbeck.

Introduction

Of Mice and Men is a short fiction by John Steinbeck published in 1937. The novella is set in the backdrop of the great depression that engulfed the United States and subsequently the whole of the Europe in the 1930s. This period is marked by rapid social changes in western history. The previous decade that is the 1920s was called as "the roaring twenties" for it was a decade of economic growth and widespread prosperity, driven by recovery from wartime annihilation and deferred spending, a boom in construction, art and literature and the rapid

growth of consumer goods such as automobiles and electricity in America and Europe. But within a decade or so a continent which was at its pinnacle of glory in terms of its economic activities crumbled to a state of mediocrity marked by widespread hunger, large scale unemployment, crash in stock markets, higher inflation etc. Harper Lee in her magnum opus *To Kill A Mocking Bird* describes the situation of America and people's struggle in order to buy food during great depression as: "A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County." (Lee 3)

The effect of this catastrophic phenomenon was widespread. It affected each and every strata of the society. But if we look closely into this it will become evident that this phenomenon had a wide-ranging effect upon the working class people. They didn't have any savings to sustain their lives during the economic hardships and in order to get job they started moving different parts of the country. This is what exactly happens in the concerned novel "*Of Mice and Men*". A lot of ranch workers are unemployed and are now in search of jobs.

The spirit of American civilisation however couldn't be subdued by this economic crisis. Instead of widespread hunger, unemployment and economic strains, Americans never forget to dream and achieve more glory, prosperity and fame. This phenomenon of dreaming and achieving more, however was not new in America. Since its Independence Declaration of 1776 the emphasis was laid on equality and prosperity of individuals. As Thomas Jefferson claims:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. ("Declaration of Independence: A Transcription")

This can be assumed as the beginning of the quest for happiness and individual prosperity, otherwise known as The American Dream. However, the "American Dream" as a phrase was coined by James Truslow Adams, a historian in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, in which he essentially stated the spirit of the American dream as:

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 a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. (Adams 317)

The availability of a vast area of free land and all sorts of natural resources attracted the masses and made it compulsory for them to dream big without thinking twice about reality. Even the poor working-class people hoped to excel in life though the circumstances were not in their favour. This has been one of the major characteristics of American civilisation, since its independence the proletariat are never given their due reward and status in society in spite of working hard. Hence all these ornamental definitions regarding American dream now seems to be more ironic. In his novel *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck portrays through his characters, the harsh reality of such kind of pipe dreams. All of the characters in the novel have their own set of dreams and aspirations which they keep on carrying throughout the novel but at the end none of the dreams could be transformed into reality. Steinbeck, as a writer shunned the traditional modes of artistic narration in order to bring about the realistic treatment of the modern man.

Dream of Owning a Land

George, Lennie and Candy, these three characters truly uphold the spirit of American dream in the novel and strikingly what is common between them is that they all belongs to the lower working-class section of the society. Their dream of owning a ranch of their own remains unfulfilled throughout the novel. The old American notion of equality and the assertion that hard work leads to the fulfilment of American dreams seems to be hollow in case of these ranch labourers. They are ambitious of getting freedom, equality, and economic stability but at the end none of these could be fulfilled. These showcase the plight of the indentured labourers who are denied the basic standards of living and owning something in America. They visualize the melting down of their own dreams in the same eyes which were used earlier to see the dreams itself.

George and Lennie being escaped from their previous employer due to some misdeed done by later are now desperately in search of a new job somewhere near California. Their American dream is to own a land without a boss. Lennie keeps on asking George about their impending future fortunes, to which the later responds: “O.K. 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 and rabbits.” (Steinbeck 14)

This is the very first instance where the characters weaved their American dream and subsequently this dream gets strengthened. Lennie, however become more anxious and excited when he listened such hopeful future of theirs and he wants George to say more about their

would-be land and farm. George becomes irritated but never the less adds further by giving hope to Lennie: “we’ll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an’ listen to the rain comin’ down on the roof-Nuts!” (Steinbeck 14)

Even if George and Lennie are now employed, they feel suffocated in their new job environment. The farm owner and his son Curly from the very beginning starts to behave with them very rudely. In this juncture two of them again talks about their dream home where nobody can disturb them and they will be inferior to no one. They are helpless because they can’t move outside now unless and until they accumulate enough money to buy a land of their own. An exasperating George responds to it by explaining:

We gotta keep it till we get a stake. We can't help it, Lennie. We'll get out jus' as soon as we can. I don't like it no better than you do." He went back to the table and set out a new solitaire hand. "No, I don't like it," he said. "For two bits I'd shove out of here. If we can get jus' a few dollars in the poke we'll shove off and go up the American River and pan gold. We can make maybe a couple of dollars a day there, and we might hit a pocket. (Steinbeck 32)

George and Lennie are so preoccupied with their dream that they do not want to spend time in making fuss about anyone or to engage in any other’s affairs except working hard in the ranch. George keeps on avoiding any possible trouble in his new job because he suspects if he gets into any such trouble then his job will be at risk. George’s carefree attitude towards other’s business comes forward when he declares: “I don't want to get mixed up in nothing. Lennie and me got to make a stake” (Steinbeck 55). This is the essential testament that shows their commitment and determination to make their dream fruitful.

Till now only George and Lennie have been seeing and discussing their American dream but now another “ranch hand” Candy joins hand with them. Candy, an “old swamper” who has lost one of his hands while working in the ranch overhears George and Lennie talking about their dream land which will have an area of about “ten acres” and has “Got a little win' mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots, nuts, got a few berries” (Steinbeck 56). Like the other “ranch hands” Candy too has no autonomy but he desperately wanted to have a land of his own seeking freedom from every bondage. This vividly portrays condition of working-class people during the time of great depression. They have nothing of their own but they still try to own everything. This is what

American Dream is all about for these poor people. They lived in such a time and society that only permit them to dream without giving them any assurance of fulfilling it. Listening to the conversation of the two friends, Candy agrees to become a part of the alliance by offering whatever amount of money that he has till now. Candy's desperation to join hands with George and Lennie suggests that he had had such high aspirations in life at some of time but unable to accomplish it. Candy's desperation can be visible through his words when he claims: "Tha's three hundred, and I got fifty more comin' the end the month. Tell you what-" He leaned forward eagerly. "S'pose I went in with you guys. Tha's three hunderd an' fifty bucks I'd put in. I ain't much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some. How'd that be?" (Steinbeck 59).

George, Lennie and Candy thus became partners and from this juncture till the end of the novella they see the dream of owning the land together. However, they failed, their dream collapses like iceberg and they never able to see their dream becoming reality. Even at the end of the novel while executing Lennie with a pistol, George urges Lennie to "Look down there across the river, like you can almost see the place." (Steinbeck 102)

Dream of Equality

John Steinbeck through the character of Crooks portrays the racial segregation and alienation of the only 'Negro' ranch hand working as a skinner. Steinbeck vividly elucidates the inhumane treatment and hostility that are inflicted upon the poor black Crooks by his white colleagues. Very shockingly he accepts and is accustomed with this inhumane racial treatment that he doesn't feel anything bad about it anymore. But somewhere inside him the flame of revolt is still burning because he dreams about being treated equally by his colleagues but never gets such equality. However, unlike George, Lennie and Candy he is fully satisfied with whatever he has with him. He is the oldest and most permanent member of the ranch yet he observes, "I ain't wanted in the bunk house" (Steinbeck 67). Upon being questioned the reason by a shocking Lennie, Crooks responds roughly: "Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me" (Steinbeck 67).

It is now evident that even amongst the ranch labourers there existed rampant racism only in terms of colour though in terms of financial stature both the races i.e. black and white were equal. Instead of helping each other in these economic hardships the white labourers choose to showcase their supremacy over black Crooks in the same manner which Europeans did in their

colonies. As Crooks is a black American, he is denied the permission to live with the white labourers even not to play with them as stated by Crooks himself. In his case the Independence Day declaration of equality of all American seems to hold no significance. He is not given any importance and nobody listens to him due to the fact that he is a black. To express this sorrowful state and how he is being undermined by the white men around him, he proclaims "This is just a nigger talkin', an' a busted-back nigger. So, it don't mean nothing" (Steinbeck 69). He is completely alienated from other members of the ranch and spend all his day reading books. We get to know about his alienation from Candy when he claims: "I been here a long time," he said. "An' Crooks been here a long time. This's the first time I ever been in his room" (Steinbeck 74). During his conversation with Lennie he tries to make Lennie feel and understand what a person goes through when he lives alone a boring life without having anybody to talk with, Crooks points out:

S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody -to 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 (Steinbeck 71).

Besides his dream of being treated equally among his fellow labourers he also acts as a foil to the American dream of George, Lennie and Candy. Crooks is a realist and he doesn't want to live in a fantasy world of owning a land because he knows it is completely impossible to have one. Being the oldest member of the ranch, he has seen many ranch labourers' coming there with the same hope of owning a piece of land in order to get rid of the human bondage but no one eventually could fulfil his dreams. His statements are in sharp contradictions to the age-old notion of American dream where equality and opportunity can be found easily. Crooks rightly observes the upside-down state of American dream, in his own words:

I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'emever gets it. Just like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head (Steinbeck 72-73).

Crooks however not only being marginalized and looked upon in contempt by his mates but also, he is a victim of bourgeoisie suppression. This was common during the salve trade era but Steinbeck shows us that this tradition of black suppression is still exist in America during 1930s.

Curly's Wife being the ranch owner's daughter-in-law holds immense power over these 'bindle stiffs' i.e. the workers of the ranch. So, she keeps on threatening these 'ranch hands' not to reveal her deceptive nature in front of her husband Curly. She addresses Crooks in a harsh and rough manner by calling him "Listen, Nigger" instead of calling him by his name. Upon receiving a stern reply from Crooks she even goes beyond any limit and threatens him uttering, "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (Steinbeck 79).

Like George, Lennie and Candy's American dream the dream of Crooks too collapses. He didn't want money, land, or some material possessions like others because he knew that such kind of dream can never be attainable but the only thing, he sought was equality, upon which notion the American democracy was founded.

Dream of Personal Fulfilment

Lennie and Curly's Wife both have their distinct American dream of personal fulfilment. They are not happy with their present state thus throughout the novel they seek for the things which would make them happy. Lennie is hopeful about his personal dream becoming true at the same time Curly's Wife laments over the fact that her dream couldn't be fulfilled. Yet both the characters through the failure of their dreams showcases the lack of opportunity and the bitter social milieu of the time during great depression.

Lennie Small, the name is in sharp contrast with the type physical features he has. Steinbeck describes him as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely" (Steinbeck 2). Part from that he has a complexity in remembering things. Beside his dream of owning a land in partnership with George he has a great appetite for soft things thus whenever the two friends talk about their dream land Lennie's focus remains largely on rabbits, dogs and chickens. But due to his gigantic size whatever he holds in his hand to pet them he unintentionally kills them. Besides his forgetfulness he can only "remember about the rabbits" (Steinbeck 4). His only ambition is to "live off the fatta the lan'. An' have rabbits" (Steinbeck 14). Constantly throughout the novel

he is being driven by the desire to get soft things to pet them which he calls "strokin' it". He keeps on asking George "how long's it gonna be till we get that little place an' live on the fatta the lan-an' rabbits?" (Steinbeck 56). George on the other hand keeps on giving him hope about their own land and rabbits. Lennie's dream of having a rabbit is embedded in his dream of having own land however the previous dream overshadows the later one. In chapter 5 he states his ambition to Curly's Wife, "We gonna have a little place," Lennie explained patiently. "We gonna have a house an' a garden and a place for alfalfa, an' that alfalfa is for the rabbits, an' I take a sack and get it all fulla alfalfa and then I take it to the rabbits." (Steinbeck 87)

However, his dream of tending and petting a rabbit in his own farm remains unfulfilled due to a series of events leading to the unintentional murder of Curly's Wife by him and his own murder by George. Curly's Wife is very hostile towards all other workers of the ranch except Lennie. Upon learning Lennie's appetite for touching and petting soft things she let him to tend her hair. But Lennie eventually kills her in this process claiming: "I done a bad thing. I done another bad thing" (Steinbeck 89). Though Lennie's killing of Curly's Wife is purely unintentional but he would definitely be held captive for such an act.

Curly's Wife is the only female character in the novel. Steinbeck chooses not to give her a name suggests the patriarchy mind-set of the American society. She has no identity of her own and apart from that she has fallen prey to a hopeless and loveless marriage. However, her version of American dream is totally different from all other characters' dream. She doesn't want to own anything rather become something, an actress. While having a conversation with Lennie she tells her present poor standard of living and that she was once offered by an actor to be inducted in his show but her mother denied citing, she is a juvenile. This incident infuriated her however he couldn't do anything. She expresses this incident citing: "Well, a show come through, an' I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my of lady- wouldn' let me. She says because I was on'y fifteen. But the guy says I coulda. If I'd went, I wouldn't be livin' like this, you bet" (Steinbeck 86).

However, that was not the only time she got a call to become an actress, she claims to have impressed another person who promises to take her to Hollywood but this opportunity also faded away and the reason she suspects her mother. It is unclear as to why her mother didn't want her children to prosper in life by achieving whatever she wants. In the case of Curly's Wife, nobody but her own mother acts as a foil to her American Dream. Curly's Wife's

mother rather arranged her marriage with Curly which was not a wise decision to make. According to Curly's Wife:

Nother time I met a guy, an' he was in pitchers. Went out to the Riverside Dance Palace with him. He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was a natural. Soon's he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it. I never got that letter. I always thought my of lady stole it [. . .] I ast her if she stole it, too, an' she says no (Steinbeck 86).

She was preoccupied with the thought of going to movies. She wishes "Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes-all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me. When they had them previews I coulda went to them, an' spoke in the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent because I was in the pitcher-. An' all them nice clothes like they wear. Because this guy says I was a natural" (Steinbeck 86-87). However, like everybody's dream, the dream of Curly's Wife remains unfulfilled due to her dramatic murder by Lennie.

Conclusion

The novel ends with the tragic death of both Curly's Wife and Lennie and with their death all the dreams discussed above ceased to exist. Each character's quest for equality, freedom, and identity ultimately perishes in front of the great depression. Furthermore, the all these characters' American dream acts as a foil to and contrasts with the very notion and definition of American dream proposed by James Truslow Adams and the Independence Day declaration which laid emphasis on availability of equal opportunity for all Americans. It seems from this novella that all such big and pompous claims have no significance in the lives of these ambitious characters. This might have happening in case of the capitalist or bourgeoisie but certainly not for the poor working-class population of America. None of the characters, in the course of the novel, could get the opportunity to see his/her dreams being manifested into reality. Steinbeck choses to highlight the issues faced by these poor farm labourers in the time of great economic hardship because they are often ignored by the mainstream discourses, which keeps itself busy in highlighting and spreading the bogus claim that America is heaven for all type of people be it owner or labourer. Very vividly and realistically Steinbeck portrays the condition of working-class people in his novels with adding a bit of humour and comic effect which resulted in tragedy at the end. However besides having a gloomy and elegiac ending this

novel provides a deep insight into the plight of working-class people. This will remain as one of the best novels in American history for its depiction of the failure of American dream.

Works Cited:

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York, Penguin Books Ltd, 2006.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, HarperCollins, 2010, p. 3.

Adams, James T. *The Epic Of America*. LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY, 1931, p. 317.

“Declaration of Independence.” *US History*, www.ushistory.org/documents/declaration.htm.
Accessed 29 Nov. 2020.

Rani, Seema. “Of Mice and Men; Steinbeck’s Parable of Aspiration and Desperation.”

SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019,

www.ijellh.com/OJS/index.php/OJS/article/view/7169.

“Of Mice and Men, and Racism: Analyzing the Character of Crooks.” *Literature Essay Samples*, 21 Apr. 2019, www.literatureessaysamples.com/of-mice-and-men-and-racism-analyzing-the-character.