Moral Issues, Loneliness and Friendship
in *Of Mice and Men*:

*John Steinbeck’s Portrayal of the Life of Migrant Ranch Workers in 1930s America*

B.A. Essay
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Abstract

This essay discusses John Steinbeck’s novel *Of Mice and Men* and his examination of the life and well-being of migrant ranch workers in America in the 1930s. For historical context, it introduces the two crises that hit America around 1930, The Great Depression and Dust Bowl, the intense sandstorms on the prairies. In his novel, Steinbeck addresses aspects of the impact that these crises had on the lives of many people in the United States, especially the high unemployment rate caused by the Great Depression, and the migrancy caused by the Dust Bowl. Since Steinbeck bases his characters on real people it is easier to sympathize with the main characters in *Of Mice and Men*. Subsequently, the essay briefly discusses moral issues in the 1930s, especially racism and sexism, and points out that even though the 1930s were difficult times for many Americans, black people and women suffered even more than the rest. Steinbeck demonstrates this in his novel by creating the characters of Crooks and Curley’s wife. Secondly the essay examines moral issues, loneliness and the need for companionship in the novel. Subsequently the characters mostly affected by racism, ageism and sexism are discussed. The black stable buck Crooks, the old Candy and the women referred to as Curley’s wife. All of them are looked down on and left out. Due to these circumstances, all of these characters are extremely lonely and long for nothing more than a true companion. Finally the essay discusses the unique friendship of the main characters George and Lennie and how lucky they feel to have each other while the others have no one to rely on except themselves. Furthermore, it demonstrates that even though George has to make a lot of sacrifices in exchange for their friendship, he is always ready to vouch for Lennie and protect his dream of a better life until the end.

**Keywords:**

Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, loneliness, friendship, 1930s, Great Depression, Dust Bowl, racism, sexism, ageism, disability, migrant workers, ranch, George, Lennie.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 3  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................. 4  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 5  
I. Historical Context: Crises in America in the 1930s ........................................................................... 8  
II. Moral Issues, Loneliness and Desire for Companionship in *Of Mice and Men* .............................. 13  
III. Friendship ....................................................................................................................................... 21  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 24  
Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................ 25
Introduction

George said, “Guys like us got no fambly. They make a little stake an’ then they blow it in. They ain’t got nobody in the worl’ that gives a hoot in hell about’ em “But not us,” Lennie cried happily. “Tell about us now.”

George was quiet for a moment. “But not us,” he said.

“Because--”

“Because I got you an’—

“An’ I got you. We got each other, that’s what, that gives a hoot in hell about us,” Lennie cried in triumph. (Steinbeck 117-18)

John Steinbeck was born in the small town of Salinas in California in February 1902 where he lived with his parents and three sisters, Esther, Beth and Mary (Parini 11, 25). His father John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. was an accountant, manager and a businessman (Shillinglaw), and his mother, Olive Hamilton, was a former schoolteacher. Steinbeck’s mother was considered a well-educated woman for her time (Parini 15). As a child, Steinbeck enjoyed the outdoors and was highly interested in nature and, later on, when he grew older and became a writer, this interest in nature reflected clearly in his writings (Benson 7). In 1919, Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University where he stayed on and off until 1925 when he left university without graduating (Benson 33). During the summers before and while he attended Stanford, Steinbeck took a job at Spreckel’s Sugar Company, a ranch close to Santa Clara. At the ranch he got to know the life of real bunkhouse “bindle stiffs” like the main characters Of Mice and Men, George and Lennie (Benson 38-39). While Steinbeck stayed at the Sugar Company ranch he associated a lot with itinerants and migrants and sensed their loneliness and difficult conditions. He felt for these men an empathy that was later reflected in his best works (Shillinglaw). After leaving Stanford in 1925, Steinbeck tried to establish a writing career in New York, but it was not until ten years later, in 1935, when Steinbeck had returned to California, that he first became widely known for his writings after publishing Tortilla Flat. In the following years Steinbeck published some of his greatest works: In Dubious Battle in 1936, Of Mice and Men in 1937, and The Grapes of Wrath in 1939 (Shillinglaw). Some of Steinbeck’s later works important to mention are East of
Eden, published in 1952, The Winter of Our Discontent in 1961 and Travels with Charley in 1962 (“John Steinbeck – Biographical”). At the age of sixty in 1962, Steinbeck was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature (Parini 533-34). Steinbeck was married three times: in January 1930 he married Carol Henning (Parini 118); in March 1943 he got married to Gwyndolyn Conger, with whom he had two sons, Thomas and John (Parini 329-362); and finally he married Elaine Anderson Scott in December 1950 (Parini 416). John Steinbeck died in the arms of his beloved wife Elaine in New York in 1968 (Parini 577-578).

The novel Of Mice and Men, was first released in February 1937 and tells the story of the friends George and Lennie, who are migrant workers in California during the Great Depression. George is Lennie’s caretaker as Lennie is mentally disabled. In the beginning of the novel they arrive at a ranch close to Soledad in California where they get a job bucking barley. They stay in a bunkhouse with some other workers on the ranch and there they get to know men who have similar hopes and dreams, that one day they will get their own place “an’ live off the fatta the lan’” (Steinbeck 16). Soon they meet their boss’s son Curley, and his wife, who seeks the workers’ attention due to her own loneliness. George warns Lennie not to interact with her because he suspects that it will get them into trouble. One of their fellow workers, Slim, gives Lennie a puppy that he likes to stroke in his free time. Later on in the novel Lennie and Curley’s wife are alone in the barn. Soon she learns about his love for stroking soft things and lets him stroke her hair. When she feels Lennie’s extremely strong hands she becomes scared and starts to scream because Lennie will not let go of her. Lennie freaks out and accidentally breaks her neck and kills her. Lennie realizes that he has done a terrible thing and runs away. The other workers, with Curley in the lead, follow Lennie with guns and instructions from Curley to kill him. George gets to him first and in order to save him from the assaults of Curley and his men he decides to calm Lennie down by telling him his favorite story, which he knows makes him happy, and then George shoots his friend in the back of the head.

When Of Mice and Men was first published in February 1937 it mostly received positive reviews and “[…] hit the best-seller list almost immediately” (Benson 351). Steinbeck had established a good reputation as a writer and his fans seem to have waited with anticipation for a new book because before the official publication date, around
117,000 copies of the novel had already been sold. A review that appeared in the New Republic in 1937 stated that the novel was “magnificently written” and that its foreshadowing of events was very well done. Furthermore a lot of critics praised Steinbeck for being able to “make such a poignant and important statement about humanity and its persistent struggle to rise above its own shortcomings in so brief a text” (“Of Mice and Men Critical Reception”). Then there were others who were not as impressed by the book. One of them was Edmund Wilson. He likened Of Mice and Men’s plot and Lennie’s death at the end to the theory about the survival of the fittest. He felt that by letting Lennie, who represents the less fortunate in the story, die in the end, Steinbeck was making some kind of a social representation of Darwin’s theory. That is to say, Wilson felt that because of Lennie’s shortcomings he was unfit for survival and therefore had to die in the end of the novel. Moreover, some critics were displeased that the story did not have the traditional happy ending. It soon became apparent that Hollywood and Broadway were highly interested in the story of George and Lennie, on the other hand, and requested a script for a movie and a play shortly after the novel’s publication. Since then, Of Mice and Men has been staged all over the world and film adaptations of the novel have been made twice (“Of Mice and Men Critical Reception”).

Although the novel is in a way a story of a unique friendship that is able to overcome social forces and loneliness, moral issues and the desire for companionship are feelings that most of the main characters are dealing with due to their conditions. In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck demonstrates that having someone to rely on, a friend or companion, is something that every person needs. But the novel also reveals the desperate social situation of the working classes in the 1930s, and of migrant farm workers in particular, which did not easily accommodate any kind of mutual support system, and least of all among those who needed it the most.
I. Historical Context: Crises in America in the 1930s

The years around 1930 were both historic and difficult years for the United States of America since two major crises struck the nation in those years. First it was the economic depression, generally referred to as The Great Depression, which struck in the fall of 1929 (McElvaine 72-75). Two years later, in 1931, the intense sandstorms of the southern plains, usually called the Dust Bowl, started blowing. The next few years were to be difficult for many Americans since a large percentage of people became unemployed and millions of people had to leave their homes for good (Worster 4).

Economic and Ecological Crises

The Great Depression 1929-1939, started with the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929, where stock prices fell almost by half overnight. The aftermath of the crisis was disastrous, first in the United States, where output fell by nearly a third and massive unemployment manifested itself, and then in Europe with similar consequences (McElvaine 72-75). In the following spring, over 3 million people in America had lost their jobs and in the next two years 12 million men and women would lose their employment as well. More often than not the unemployed had no money to buy food, nor a place to stay and it was a common sight to see people staying under bridges, along the railroad tracks or even in public toilets. Farmers did not feel the impacts of the Wall Street crash as soon as the urban population because most of them had not participated in the stupendous prosperity that occurred in the years before the crisis. Also, they could provide their own food supplies and therefore did not have to worry about food shortages (Worster 10). Unfortunately, it was not going to be long until farmers of the country would feel the impact of another crisis that struck in the 1930s, the Dust Bowl.

Thus, it turned out that the economic depression was not going to be the only crisis of 1930s America because in 1931, intense sandstorms started to blow from the southern Plains to the East Coast (Worster 4). These great sandstorms were going to have a much worse impact on farmers in America than the economic depression. Farmers on the Great Plains were especially hard hit as the sand lay like a thick blanket over all the farmland and made a huge area virtually uninhabitable (Worster 10). When
the farmers on the Great Plains could no longer grow crops due to the dust storms, they could no longer provide for their families. Soon the conditions of farmers living on the Great Plains turned from bad to catastrophic due to the terrible droughts and all the financial difficulties resulting from the economic depression. As one can imagine, it was almost impossible to live under these conditions and therefore many of the families living on the Great Plains sold everything they owned apart from food, cooking utensils and bedding, packed it onto their vehicles and drove off in search of a better life. Presumably it was very difficult for these people to leave their homes and venture into the unknown. According to historians, over three million people left the American Midwest during the 1930s, in the hope of gaining a better life elsewhere (Worster 52). Many of these people headed to California in the hope of either getting a job on factory farms or being able to set up their own farms. It is estimated that two out of every five migrants in America went to California in the 1930s, including over 86,000 extremely poor migrants who could not provide for themselves. Consequently, the population of California grew immensely in these years or almost by 20%, which was more than in any other state in the United States (Worster 50). Since Oklahoma was the state that was most affected by the dust storms, a large part of the migrants was from Oklahoma. Subsequently all migrants got the nickname Okies, whether they were from Oklahoma or not (DeAngelis).

The owners of the biggest farms in California were thrilled to get this cheap workforce as they had lost their Mexican workers in 1929 due to restrictions in immigration. However, the migrants themselves where not as thrilled when they arrived in California and realized that the huge farms in California mostly needed seasonal workers during harvest time, harvesting cotton, lettuce, oranges and other types of fruits and vegetables. Consequently, most of the workers only had employment for half of the year, doing hard work in poor conditions for very low wages due to the oversupply of workers (Worster 52-53). The living quarters provided by the farms were not up to par and due to limited employment and poverty most of the migrants lived in shelters or poor condition camps. Consequently all kinds of illnesses and diseases were prevalent due to unclean conditions and monotonous food. Furthermore the migrants were more often than not looked down on by the locals and had to face serious prejudice and were among other things called “shiftless trash that lived like hogs” by the Californians.
After having sought out facts about the difficulties that the migrants experienced having to flee their homes and settle down in a new place, it is easier to understand both the bitterness and the hopes and dreams of the main characters in *Of Mice and Men*. Furthermore, Steinbeck’s characters are based on real people, real migrants who lived these hard times and really had to struggle their way through life with all kinds of obstacles in the way. By studying the background and actual experience of these people, it is much easier for those who read the novel to put themselves in the shoes of the characters in *Of Mice and Men* and sympathize with their actions and behavior.

**Moral Ethos in the US in the 1930s**

When *Of Mice and Men* was first published, racism and sexism were generally accepted in society. Both issues play an immense role in the novel since two of the characters are treated badly by the other people on the ranch, Crooks due to his color and Curley’s wife due to her gender. Sexism and racism are problems that have been ongoing for centuries and despite the fact that there are only around ninety years since the Great Depression struck America, both issues were prominent at that time.

The word sexism means discrimination based on a person’s gender or biological sex. Men and women are therefore not considered equals. Instead one sex is believed to be of more value than the other. In most cases, females are considered the less valuable sex. At least women were certainly believed to be of less value than men in the 1930s when discrimination against women was still very noticeable. It therefore comes as no surprise that the concept of sexism was created a few decades later to draw attention to the unjust treatment that women had experienced and were still facing in many ways (Masequesmay). The traditional idea was that each sex had a certain role, where the lines were clear about what men on the one hand and women on the other hand, could and should do. Women were believed to be the weaker, less intelligent, sex and their main role in life was the traditional role of the housewife. Women should first and foremost take care of the home and their children and they were expected to be completely submissive to men. Society was supposed to be dominated by men because they were considered stronger both physically and emotionally. Men were believed to be more intelligent than women and therefore better at learning and managing things...
outside the home. Men were also considered much more credible than women and if a woman was abused in some way by a man it was very hard for her to seek her redress. Often the responsibility was transferred back to the victim and women were led to believe that they had brought this on themselves with either inappropriate behavior or clothing. It is virtually certain that the centuries-long discrimination against women created social barriers that prevented them from succeeding and flourishing outside the walls of their home (Masequesmay). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that it was hard for Curley’s wife to find her way as the only woman on the ranch.

Racism is no less prominent in the novel than sexism. Steinbeck draws attention to the extreme racism that prevailed in America around 1930 by creating the character of the black stable buck, Crooks. The late 1920s and the 1930s were difficult times for many Americans because of the economic depression and there was a lot of unemployment and poverty. It is however, safe to say that minorities such as black Americans suffered even more than the rest. Racial discrimination had long existed in America and black Americans, originated in Africa, had been oppressed ever since the first slaves were brought over from Africa in 1619. Even though slavery had been abolished in 1865 by the 13th Amendment and former slaves had received citizenship and the right to vote in the years from 1868-1870, colored people still had to face a lot of prejudice and discrimination in the 1920s and 1930s (“Slavery in America”). This discrimination occurred widely but most obviously in employment, education, housing and health. When the economic crisis hit America in 1929, the situation was to deteriorate significantly. Since black Americans were considered of less value and generally looked down on by whites who ruled society, it was almost invariably the black Americans who were the first to lose their jobs. Consequently, unemployment among black Americans increased greatly and in 1930 three years after the great collapse 50 percent of the black population was unemployed. During these years, black people had to face extreme discrimination in terms of employment as they were not only the first to be fired but also the last to be hired. All of a sudden, jobs like street cleaners, garbage collectors, and elevator operators, that had been regarded as “negro jobs” were good enough for white people in need of employment. Subsequently the unemployment rate among whites was 25 percent or half of the unemployment rate among black people (“Black Americans 1929-1941”).
The 1930s were difficult for black males who worked in agriculture and discrimination regarding salaries was extremely common among these men. Those black Americans who managed to hold on to their jobs, often got their salaries reduced by half while the white people still got full payment. Around 90% of these workers were tenant farmers, farm laborers or tenant farmers who gave part of each crop as rent, called Sharecroppers. Commonly black sharecroppers had the average income of 295 dollars a year while white sharecroppers were paid 417 dollars a year. To clarify, black sharecroppers were earning 122 dollars less for the exact same job just because of their skin color. Unfortunately, injustice of this kind was not uncommon and hostility between white people and black increased as competition for employment became greater. Furthermore, it was not only the employers who discriminated against their staff depending on the color of their skin, but the labor unions were also fully involved in the corruption. The labor unions would take part in the racial discrimination through measures such as denying black people access to the unions or striking against commercial businesses that hired black people for occupations wanted by whites. Since colored people had lower wages as well as having virtually no rights, they were poorer than other Americans and their living conditions were much worse (“Black Americans 1929-1941”). This description of how bad the conditions of black people actually were, are consistent with Crook’s conditions on the farm. Neither is he allowed to do the same job as the other workers nor is he allowed to live in the same house. He is completely separated from the white people. Accordingly, it is quite understandable that Crooks chooses to withdraw almost completely. He knows that the battle is already lost.
II. Moral Issues, Loneliness and Desire for Companionship in *Of Mice and Men*

Once the words go down, you are alone and committed. It’s as final as a plea in court from which there is no retracting. That’s the lonely time. Nine tenths of a writer’s life do not admit of any companionship nor friend nor associate. And until one makes peace with loneliness and accepts it as a part of the profession, as celibacy is a part of the priesthood, until then there are times of dreadful dread.

*Steinbeck, letter to John Murphy in 1961.* (Meyer 304)

Steinbeck’s fictional characters were not the only ones facing loneliness, as this same feeling was also anchored within the writer himself. Michael Meyer, says in his book *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men* that even though his success as a writer was positive, he felt that the critical public’s praise and his popularity entailed considerable loneliness and isolation. In fact, the feeling of loneliness had accompanied him since he was a child and teenager but increased substantially when he became a great success in the literary world. He found it difficult to handle criticism and felt underappreciated and misunderstood, feeling as well that he did not belong to any particular group in the literary world. Consequently, he withdrew and was tentative in his interactions with other people. It is therefore not surprising that this feeling of loneliness, that he knew so well himself, appeared in many of his most famous characters (Meyer 291). Steinbeck’s unique approach to the themes of homelessness and loneliness, where he places two men who have a very special friendship, despite being very different both mentally and physically, in the center of the story, distinguishes him from other writers. Furthermore, Meyer believes that Lennie and George demonstrate that “character is the engine of a plot” (Meyer 239).

Loneliness is a prominent theme in the novel and seems to afflict most of the characters. Although there are many workers on the ranch, they are all on their own. They travel alone between ranches in search of work and usually they only stay for a short time on each ranch. They do not seem to have any special home to go to nor a family to turn to. This is demonstrated in the beginning of the novel when George says
this powerful sentence to Lennie: “Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place” (Steinbeck 15). But even though George says guys like us, this statement might not apply as strongly to them as it does to the other ranch workers because they have each other to count on. Despite the fact that the workers seem a little shocked that George and Lennie travel together and even wonder whether their relationship is romantic, one can read between the lines that they also appear to envy George and Lennie a little bit to have each other to rely on (Meyer 240). In the novel Steinbeck focuses on demonstrating the loneliness of the main characters, especially Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife, but they are all, for different reasons, excommunicated from the ranch community.

Candy is an old and handicapped man whose main occupation on the ranch is to clean the Bunkhouses. He, along with Crooks, is one of the few workers who has permanent residence on the ranch. Since Candy is both a lot older than the other workers and works a different job than they do due to his disability, he seems to be looked down on by the other workers and therefore withdraws into himself in their company. Candy has one friend on the ranch though, his dog, who, like his owner, is both very old and weak. Candy’s dog is his dearest friend and keeps him company all day long. But when the dog is put down by one of the workers due to his old age and bad health, it seems like Candy loses his will to live. After losing his one true friend and companion, he becomes extremely lonely and gives the impression that he would like to have been killed as well. But as it is in human nature to desire companionship, Candy becomes very excited when he hears about George and Lennie’s plans about getting their own place and is eager to help them. He likes to feel useful and is even willing to use the little savings he has to buy a home with two men he barely knows. His sincere interest in George and Lennie’s ideas about having a home of their own shows how strongly he desires to get a way from the depressing and lonely environment of the ranch. As well as having a place of his own, he would share it with people who do not look down on him because of his old age and physical disability.

The stable buck Crooks is an important part of the novel. He is crippled and black and therefore he faces a lot of discrimination. The other workers do not consider him as one of them because of the color of his skin. Even though his job as a stable buck is very important and he serves it well, the other ones, except for Slim, consider
him of less value because he is a nigger. Crooks is not allowed to enter the bunkhouse, where the other workers live. Along with Curley’s wife, Crooks is probably the most isolated person on the ranch and when he allows Lennie to enter his quarters he gets emotional and reveals his loneliness:

Maybe you can see now. You got George. You know he’s goin’ to come back. 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 set out here an’ read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you had to read books. Books ain’t no good. A guy needs somebody — to be near him. 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… (Steinbeck 82)

This particular conversation between Crooks and Lennie demonstrates how extremely lonely Crooks is and that the he desires nothing more than companionship. Despite having a minor role in the novel, Crooks is one of the most influential characters regarding the themes of homelessness and loneliness as his original home is in Africa, from which his ancestors were brought unwillingly as slaves to America. Crooks bears witness to being originated in Africa because of the color of his skin and is therefore considered of a lower class than the white people (Meyer 244). Despite the fact that his ancestors were from Africa, Crooks himself was born and raised in America on his father’s chicken ranch and should therefore be considered American. Again, because of his skin color, he is isolated and is never treated like an American, except few times when he was a young boy and played with white kids who lived nearby: “The white kids come to play at our place, an’ sometimes I went to play with them, and some of them was pretty nice” (Steinbeck 79). But since he is the only black person living on the ranch, he is completely on his own and has no real friend to turn to. The only people who are allowed to enter Crooks room are Slim and the boss. Those two are probably also the only people interested in entering Crooks’ room because the other workers do not want to have anything to do with a “nigger”. Even though Slim is not actually Crooks’ friend, he is kind to him and his kindness towards Crooks suggests that Slim is ahead of his time. He is not as prejudiced against him as the other workers and instead
treats him like other people despite the color of his skin. Lennie is also different than the other ranch workers, because he does not seem to have any prejudice against people, no matter who they are and how they look. So even though Crooks is reluctant at first to let Lennie into his room, finally the desire for companionship and the feeling that Lennie is not there to insult him wins and he allows Lennie to join him (Meyer 242).

The third character in Steinbeck’s novel that suffers from severe loneliness is Curley’s wife. She is very lonely because she is the only female on the ranch and is not allowed to talk to any of the men due to her husband’s extreme jealousy. Like Crooks, she reveals her isolation and loneliness to Lennie because she knows he will not judge her: “Why can’t I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely… I get lonely… You can talk to people, but I can’t talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How’d you like not to talk to anybody?” (Steinbeck 98). Instead of withdrawing, like Crooks does, she seeks the men’s attention and shows a forceful and confident personality in an attempt to deal with her loneliness and isolation. Consequently, the workers interpret her behavior as flirting and consider her a promiscuous woman who wants to make a fool out of them by leading them on (Meyer 304). She tries to hide her insecurity by talking down to Crooks, Lennie and Candy when she tells them that she could have been famous, but instead, she spends a Saturday night, when “Ever’body out doin’ som’pin. Ever’body! …talkin’ to a bunch of bindle stiffs – a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep – an’ likin’ it because they ain’t nobody else” (Steinbeck 89). In reality though, this behavior is just her way to escape from the constant feeling of loneliness, as, like Crooks, she desires nothing more than another person’s companionship (Meyer 304).

Although friendship and loneliness are the main themes in Steinbeck’s novel Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck also draws a vivid picture of two moral issues. The moral issues in question are sexism and racism, and according to Richard Hart in his article “Moral Experience in Of Mice and Men: Challenges and Reflection”, Steinbeck makes the reader feel the moral burdens of the novel by making the text trouble our mind and evoke feelings of doubt, pity and anger, especially when reading the chapters where Crooks and Curley’s wife play the leading roles (Hart 34). Racism and sexism seem to have been among Steinbeck’s greatest concerns at the time, as in some respects one
might feel that the novel is a critique of the discrimination that both women and colored
people, had to face. In Of Mice and Men this mainly applies to Curley’s wife, the only
woman in the novel and the stable buck Crooks, the only black person in the novel.
Even though Crooks and Curley’s wife have few things in common, they are both set
apart from the white males on the ranch, Crooks due to his race and Curley’s wife due
to her gender.

As Curley’s wife is the only woman on the ranch, she does not have anyone of
the same gender to turn to, no girlfriend, mother or sister. As she is desperate for
company, she turns to the men on the ranch. They, on the other hand, do not want
anything to do with her because they are convinced that if her extremely jealous
husband, Curley, were to catch them talking to her, he would fire them. Consequently,
Curley’s wife is bound to face gender discrimination from the men on the ranch
throughout the story and the workers do not hesitate to decide what a rotten character
she is without knowing her at all. A clear example of this is when Lennie is admiring
her after the first time he and George meet her and George warns him about her by
saying: “Don’t you even take a look at that bitch. I don’t care what she says and what
she does. I seen ‘em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her.
You leave her be” (Steinbeck 36). This is the first time George meets her, but still he is
quick to judge her by her behavior and decides she is nothing but trouble. Furthermore,
it seems like he is trying to put the blame on her, that if a man would do something bad
to her, it would be her fault because of her behavior.

By creating such a prominent female character, who is also the only female
character in the novel, Steinbeck demonstrates how male-dominated the culture and
attitudes towards women were at the time it was written (Hart 35). An example of the
negative estimate of women of that time is obvious early on in the novel when Candy is
describing Curley’s wife to George and Lennie and states that Curley has “married … a
tart” (Steinbeck 31). George seems to have that view on many women because he
immediately answers that Curley “ain’t the first” (Steinbeck 31). This clearly shows the
massive prejudices that were against women. Even though neither Candy nor George
know the woman at all, they are willing to decide that she is a tart. Even though the
workers see Curley’s wife every day and she is married to their boss, it seems like none
of them knows anything about her. She is so insignificant in the eyes of the workers that
they do not even know her real name but instead always refer to her as her husband’s
dependency by always calling her Curley’s wife (Hart 35). Furthermore, the workers view
her as an object rather than a person, an object that they like to look at and dream about
touching but they have no interest in talking to her and getting to know her.
Consequently, in his article about moral experience in the novel, Hart wonders whether
the social attitudes towards women in the 1930s, pushed her to put herself out there in a
sexual way in order to get some attention and company (Hart 36). By creating the
character of Curley’s wife, Steinbeck obviously wanted to draw attention to attitudes
towards women. When describing her character to an actress that was supposed to play
the role of Curley’s wife on Broadway, Steinbeck claims that she is “accustomed to a
male-dominated society, pretending to be something she is not, alone and unloved”
(Hart 36). Furthermore, when describing the character, Steinbeck states: “No man has
ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make” (Wallsten 154-155). This
demonstrates how hopeless Curley’s wife’s conditions were, no matter how much she
tried to reach out to the other people on the ranch, everybody excluded her.

Just like Curley’s wife is the only woman on the ranch, Crooks is the only black
person on the ranch and therefore has no one to turn to. Because of the color of his skin,
Crooks is considered less of a human being than the white workers and is therefore both
mentally and physically isolated. By demonstrating how the white people treat Crooks,
Steinbeck points out the great distress that prejudice may entail for those exposed to
them and how morally wrong the behavior of the perpetrator is. The other workers
consider Crooks of little value and as with Curley’s wife, they do not use his real name,
but always refer to him as the nigger (Hart 39). He has become so hopeless and
accustomed to being mistreated that instead of standing up for himself, he draws silently
into his shell.

Crooks is not allowed to live in the Bunkhouse with the other workers because
of his skin color. When Lennie asks him why he is not wanted in the bunkhouse, Crooks
answers: “’Cause I’m black. They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m
black. They say I stink” (Steinbeck 77). Just like Candy, Crooks is not a seasonal
worker like the other ones and the ranch is his home. As he is not allowed to socialize
with the other workers he has his own tiny room in a shed next to the barn and sleeps in
a “long box filled with straw,” (Steinbeck 75) and “…a manure pile under the window”
The fact that he sleeps in some kind of box says a lot about his poor status on the ranch. In the Essential Criticism of the novel by Hart, he states that the description of Crooks room, being separated from the bunkhouse, “is one of the most vivid, powerful and succinct depictions of racism’s effects in American literature” (Hart 40). Since by reading this description of Crooks living quarters, one realizes that white people on the ranch seem to find black people so disgusting that they cannot by any means share a room with them.

Both Crooks and Curley’s wife have doubts about George, Lennie’s and Candy’s dream about having a place of their own. When Crooks hears about their plans he says to Lennie: “Nobody never gets heaven, and nobody gets no land. It’s just in their head. They’re all the time talkin’ about it, but it’s jus’ in their head” (Steinbeck 84). But when Crooks learns more about their dream and finds out they already got most of the money for the land, he starts to let his hopes up for a life where he would have both freedom and respect. Consequently he offers go with them and work for his keep. At that moment Curley’s wife arrives and when hearing about their intentions about getting their own land she is quick to express her indignation towards their plans. Candy and Crooks get angry because of her negative interference and tell her to leave. It is in that scene where the reader sees one of the clearest example of racism in all of the novel. As soon as Crooks has told her to leave she says: “Listen, Nigger. You know what I can do to you if you open your trap? …I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny” (Steinbeck 91). In other words, she threatens to have him hanged if he will not keep his place as a submissive nigger. Crooks knows that he has no rights and therefore Curley’s wife could get him hanged if she wanted to. For this reason he shows perfect submission instead of standing up for himself and he withdrew completely “…and he pressed himself against the wall” (Steinbeck 91). Subsequently, Crooks has lost all the confidence that he had only moments before and claims that he does not want to take part in their dream anymore. This sudden change of heart demonstrates that the most harmful effects of racism, the victim’s refusal of the freedom they desire (Hart 41).

By creating the characters of Crooks and Curley’s wife, Steinbeck manages to draw a very clear picture of the racism and sexism thriving in society at that time. At the same time he shows the ignorance among other people regarding these moral issues.
Furthermore, it is obvious that all the characters discussed above, Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife, are dealing with great loneliness as they are set aside due to their age, race and sex. To begin with Candy’s loneliness was not as strong as Crooks’ and Curley’s wife because he at least had his dog by his side. But once the dog is put down, Candy finds himself in the same position as Crooks and Curley’s wife, completely on his own, with no one to turn to. All of them desire nothing more than someone’s comfort and companionship, someone who is willing to accept them and be there for them. Accordingly, it is no wonder that they envy Lennie of having George by his side even though he is mentally disabled, which according to the ethos of the 1930s meant that he should have been set aside just like Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife. Instead he has a dear friend who would not abandon him, no matter what.
III. Friendship

Although loneliness is a prominent theme in the novel, George and Lennie’s unique friendship runs like a red thread through the story and one can read between the lines how valuable this friendship is to both of them. In spite of the fact that George and Lennie’s friendship is not always easy for George to handle because of Lennie’s shortcomings, George is always ready to vouch for Lennie. For example, he assures both the boss and the other workers that Lennie is a good worker and therefore deserves the job “…he’s sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull” (Steinbeck 24). In The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, Michael Meyer demonstrates that “…the bond between George and Lennie is based entirely on character and virtue” because even though George allows himself to be frustrated with Lennie, he does not tolerate that other people treat him badly or call him names (Meyer 240). An example of this is early on in the novel when Slim refers to Lennie as a “cuckoo” due to his mental disabilities and George is quick to answer: “He ain’t no cuckoo…. He’s dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy” (Steinbeck 44). Subsequently George states that he himself is not that bright either, otherwise he would not be bucking barley for as low wages as are paid on the ranch. This shows that George is ready to pull himself down in order to raise people’s opinion of Lennie. Another example of how George does cannot stand that other people treat Lennie badly is in the end of the novel when Lennie has killed Curley’s wife. George knows that Curley and his men will either kill Lennie or put him in jail and in order to spare Lennie from the terror of knowing he is going to die or rot in jail, he decides to calm him down, get his mind to his happy place and then shoots him himself. In this way, Lennie dies as a happy man looking forward to their future instead of being confused and terrified.

George considers himself and Lennie lucky to have each other and thinks that they are not as lonely as the other workers because they have each other. They also have their dream of having their own place together, a dream that seems to be just around the corner. Both their friendship and their dream make them feel like their future is a little brighter than that of the other workers: “They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to…. With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us” (Steinbeck 15).
Although George cannot imagine being without Lennie, he has had to sacrifice a lot for their friendship and sometimes he seems to wonder how much easier his life would be if he would not have to watch Lennie all the time. When he allows himself to think like that he becomes extremely frustrated and rages at Lennie. An example of George’s frustration towards Lennie is in the beginning of the novel when they have just escaped from Weed.

God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An’ I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool… An’ whatta I got? I got you! You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get. Jus’ keep me shovin’ all over the country all the time. An’ that ain’t the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out… You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all the time.

(Steinbeck 12)

After saying all of this to Lennie, George feels very ashamed for being so nasty and when Lennie offers to leave, George does not want him to go. Even though Lennie is hard to take care of, George would rather have him by his side than be completely alone like the other workers.

George and Lennie’s friendship is very special and according to Michael Meyer it was very atypical for men in 1930s America to have such a special bond. For that reason, the fact that George is always willing to put himself on the line for Lennie seems strange to the other male characters in the novel. Therefore they might get the feeling that there is a homosexual attraction between George and Lennie. Both Slim and the boss are surprised that George and Lennie travel together and wonder why George is ready to go through so much trouble to take care of Lennie (Meyer 240). When they arrive at the ranch and George has presented them to Slim, Slim cannot hold back his words and says:
Funny how you an’ him string along together… Hardly none of the guys ever travel together. I hardly ever seen two guys travel together. You know how the hands are, they just come in and get their bunk and work a month, and then they quit and go out alone. Never seem to give a damn about anybody. It jus’ seems kinda funny a cuckoo like him and a smart little guy like you travelin’ together” (Steinbeck 44).

The boss’s response is similar as he says to George that he has “never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy” (Steinbeck 25). This demonstrates that it was very rare that migrant workers traveled together, let alone that a man like George was willing to take care of a mentally disabled man like Lennie. This shows how extraordinary George’s kindness and generosity towards Lennie is. Furthermore, by creating such a unique friendship, it feels like Steinbeck is suggesting that if migrant workers were to show more human kindness to one another they would not be so lonely and might even have a considerably happier life.
Conclusion

When reading *Of Mice and Men*, one realizes that life in America in the 1930s, in these hard times of two major crises, was far from being a bed of roses. Due to high unemployment rate and difficult weather conditions, a lot of people left their homes in search of a better life elsewhere. Migrant ranch workers flocked to California in the hope of getting employment. The work was often scarce, poorly paid and they constantly had to move from one place to another. These are difficult conditions to live with. Moral issues such as racism and sexism were prominent in society at the time and women and colored people often had to face great injustice. In his novel, *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck sheds light on the difficult and lonely life of the people on the ranch by creating memorable characters such as George, Lennie, Crooks, Curley’s wife and Candy. Furthermore, he demonstrates how hard it was to be considered one of the less fortunate. He points out the countless things in society that could have been done better. These include bad treatment of people who were considered of less value, mainly women and black Americans. Furthermore, Steinbeck demonstrates how true and unique George and Lennie’s friendship is and what George is willing to do in order to spare Lennie from humiliation and abuse.

Steinbeck reminds us that each and every person should be accepted for who they are and be able to live in harmony with others. Migrant ranch workers had to work hard to survive and lived an isolated and lonely life. When dealing with these tough times and uncertainty about the future it was necessary to have someone by your side to count on, a true friend who is willing to sacrifice everything for you. Unfortunately, such friendship does not come easily.
Works Cited


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