

# African Americans' Dreams and Expression of Love during the Great Depression: A Critical Reading through *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

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## Abstract

Love and dream sometime appear as inseparable things that keep people hoping and fighting for living and better life; this is much true for those African Americans, who, after they were said to be emancipated, have had to pay daily tribute for that change of status. And when an almost uncontrollable crisis as the Great Depression occurred, those African Americans could do nothing but dream of miracles, and live on the reciprocal assistance and love from their fellows. John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* came in this context, with the description of two young African Americans' unreachable dream and the impact of their dependence and their excessive love for each other. This study is the revisitation of two different and opposite black Americans' eventful life who, in search of a much chimeric future, have been committing crimes, which will make impossible the achieving of their goal. Steinbeck's novel is then plotted in the double context of American racial segregation and the 1929 global economic crisis. The characteristic of this study has been many folds: first it has considered the context, that is the circumstances or events that form the environment within which both the historical Great depression and Steinbeck's novel have taken place; then it has based on critical thinking, which is a disciplined intellectual criticism that combines research knowledge of historical context, and balanced judgement, that is, evaluating, examining and analyzing.

## Keywords

African Americans, Great Depression, Love, Unattained Ream, Racial

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## Segregation, Death

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### 1. Introduction

Literature has always gone along with every aspect in the American history. As such, during and after the great depression when America was almost drawn into a cataclysm, many American authors have produced works on the issue, underlining what America underwent during that economic crisis. John Steinbeck wrote a novel during the period, *Of Mice and Men*, where he depicts the dreams of two young Americans trying to escape atrocities and misery, and the tragic fall of the country's economy, while looking for their own identity. *Of Mice and Men* is a novel set on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California during "the Great Depression of the 1930s when in America many children, men and women suffered duly for survival" (Gates, 2003). Indeed, On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1929, millions of dollars were wiped out in an event that became known as the WallStreet Crash. It led to the Depression in America which crippled the country from 1930-1936. People lost their life savings when firms and banks went bust, and 12 to 15 million men and women (one third of America's population) were unemployed. Knowing that this was a period of time when Blacks in America were some second class citizens, it is clear the John Steinbeck's novel to depict African Americans who had to confide in dreams and love. "*Of Mice and Men* takes its title from a famous lyric by the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796)" (Maulana, 1982). Burns's poem "To a Mouse" contains the lines, "The best laid plans of mice and men/often go awry." (<http://www.wikipedia.com/john.steinbeck/key>, retrived Nov, 13 2019).

Like many writers of the Modern Period (1915-1945), John Steinbeck attempts to make sense of the early decades of the 20th century; he sees the humanity in a class of people who are often ignored by writers and by society at large. These issues are further developed in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. When the stock market crashed in 1929, an already awful situation for farmers and farm workers got considerably worse. Following World War I, crop prices plunged, forcing farmers to expand their farms and buy more equipment to make up for the short-fall. As a result, many farmers and farm workers migrated to California in hopes of finding enough work to live. In the novel, George and Lennie migrated for a similar aim.

The methodology for writing the present paper is based on reading the novel, *Of Mice and Men*, with other literary works dealing with the post-emancipation problems faced by the Blacks in America, then making a critical analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the reading materials. The literary theory used for this paper writing has been historiography; this is concerned with the principles of historical research or writing, the writing of history based on scholarly disciplines such as the analysis and evaluation of source materials, the ex-

isting findings and interpretations relating to a particular historical topic, like the Great Depression, or a body of historical literature.

## 2. The Great Depression and the African Americans' Dreams

### 2.1. Lennie and George: The Symbols of the American Dreams

America is said to be a land of compromise, but this has always happened as a prejudice onto the Blacks. The emancipation proclamation being a false promise, it was undoubtedly clear that the new African American's condition would differ very little, if any difference, from his former slavery status. And when the whole world happened to be shaken by an unexpected economic collapse, it was evident that the already miserable Blacks would be the first and greatest victims. Such is the main point John Steinbeck seek to highlight through the duo characters of George and Lennie. The farm George and Lennie hope to own is a symbol of the American Dream. Like a mirage, the farm leads George, Lennie, and other ranchers like Candy and Crooks, to indulge in the dream of living "off the fatta the lan". George's elaborated description of the farm's abundant plants and animals also makes it seem like a symbol of paradise. Lennie's dream is to tend the rabbits on the farm that he and George hope to own one day. This dream establishes Lennie's complete innocence. But Lennie loves the rabbits because of their soft fur, and his love of touching soft things leads to his doom. The rabbits, then, symbolize not only innocence, but also the downfall of innocence in a harsh world.

*Of Mice and Men* explores the dynamics of male friendship. When Lennie asks George to tell him why they're not like other ranchers, George explains that they're different because they have each other. And they support each other's premises; also they love each other as brothers, which seems typical to them, since such reciprocal love and dependence is not to be notice with others in their environment. Usually ranchers have no family, no friends, and, therefore, no future. George and Lennie's friendship strikes the other ranch workers as odd: their dependence on each other makes the boss and Curley suspicious; and Slim observes that ranch workers rarely travel together because they're scared of each other. Although most of the men in the novel are entirely alone, they all crave true companionship. As Crooks, perhaps the novel's most solitary character because of his black skin, puts it, "A guy needs somebody—to be near him" (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 35).

Dreams are a significant motif in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The author presents a couple of destitute workers driven by a single dream that seems unattainable. However, their friendship keeps the dream alive, and Steinbeck uses other characters to cause the reader to believe that they might actually succeed in their goals. Nevertheless, the dream is never fulfilled and the characters who have counted on it the most are the ones who are the most devastated. Within the novel, "the American Dream represents the possibility of success and future happiness to those people who would otherwise be without hope" (Tohou, 2005).

George and Lennie are reassured by the thought that they are not like the other men who “ain’t got nothing to look ahead to” (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 29). They are moving from ranch to ranch because of the trouble that Lennie gets into, but they have the possibility of one day coming to a standstill as he knows a place where they could “get it for six hundred bucks”. The fact that the place is “real” encourages the men to think that their Dream could be reality. Judging from his excitement when Candy becomes part of the dream and his exclamation that they now “could swing her”, it appears that he did not believe the dream was realistic beforehand. Ultimately George allows himself to believe in the dream too, and it brings him hope that hard work and perseverance will lead to a better future than the life that he and Lennie were living at the moment.

## 2.2. Opposite Characters Striving for the Same Dream

In the plot, John mostly concentrates on the two main protagonists, Lennie and George who have different ambitions within their common dream, who behave very differently; even mentally and physically, the two characters were opposite. George is short and small but big in the head; he is a matured person, whereas Lennie is in good shape, tall and physically big, but immature, always acting as a child. Lennie has come under the care and protection of George since Lennie’s aunt Claudia has passed away. It has been really difficult for George to remind a grown man of his duties, and how he should live so as not to get into troubles. But every time, Lennie acts awkwardly, but never willingly though. He has a dear and compassionate love for rabbits and mice. He could grasp a mouse in his hands to death, petting them violently, so showing his love for them. Lennie is a big fan of mice, but his loving them has been excessive and it lead has always ended in destruction. “I’d pet’em, and pretty soon they bit my hand, I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead, because they was so little” (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 11).

Both characters in the plot have happened to have disputes, especially when Lennie get them into trouble. Lennie once has pinched a girl’s dress, beautiful for him and has nearly killed her. The girl has screamed and the two boys have got refuge in the woods down the ranch, where they settle like home and leave the city for Lennie not to do anything stupid again. The American dream of our two inseparables is not to be fulfilled since Lennie has shown to be an obstacle. They have then been moving from an area to the other, because every time they have a job somewhere, Lennie will convict and draw George into a trouble. George has dreams, and if selfish, he just has to get rid of Lennie, then live a better life of his, having a family, a decent life enjoy his freedom, and making his dream to become true. But, he has always been trying to accommodate Lennie though. For George, the dream is having a land, a big farm where they can achieve their goal; but on the opposite, Lennie’s only limited dream is having land where he can raise some rabbits and mice and pet them sometimes. But in the end, the dream can’t be achieved just because Lennie has messed things up and turned the dream

into drama.

### **2.3. The Sudden Collapse of a Dream Plans**

Nearly the entire main characters *Of Mice and Men* harbor dreams and plans that never come true. Most notably, George, Lennie, and Candy share a doomed dream of buying their own farm and living off the land. For George, the dream could have been easier, had he had to make it alone. “if I was alone I could live so easy, I could go get a job an’ work , an’ no trouble,” (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 12).

Lennie has his own private dream of living in a cave with his own rabbits and the mice. He almost thinks instantly about how he pets them. His feelings to the animals are so important in his mindset, and that even leads them, he and George, to having troubles with people. Because of his strong emotions to those small creations, Lennie, out of carelessness pinch them to death. “They was so little”, he said, apologetically. “I’d pet’em, and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead-because they was so little” (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 11).

Lennie has no control in his feelings and the desire burning into him for something. In the end, the novel’s main theme is that people must learn to reconcile their dreams with reality, to accept that everyone’s best laid plans often perish. These plans “go awry” not because the characters in the novel give up on them, but because forces beyond their control destroy them. This is also the reflected message from the bleak economic outlook of the Great Depression which destroyed the American citizens and their dreams. Hence, the dreams of Lennie and George couldn’t be achieved, because George shot at Lennie, just to protect him from suffering in the hands of Curley and his guys who were looking for him to get revenge for Lennie’s killing Curley’s wife.

## **3. Protective Love opposite Possessive Love**

### **3.1. George’s Expression of Love for Lennie**

All the characters in the plot have experienced sorrow and pain, and in particularly the relationship between Lennie and George, the two main protagonists of the novel who developed a serious companionship, love and compassion. This couldn’t last for long when George killed his own best friend and brother to protect him from suffering from hard treatments from Curley and his followers. He won’t tolerate anyone touching the hair of Lennie; he has to kill him himself before Curley who in the seeking of revenge has devil thoughts in his mind. From then, George will always live into depression and sorrow. He will hardly accommodate with living alone now, but that is the lesser burden. George cannot stop the project of killing Lennie; he knows it is impossible, since the penalty for murdering is death. George is the only person to know where Lennie is hiding, after he has killed Curley’s wife, and nobody else can anticipate on that place. Isn’t it George himself who has told Lennie to run to that river bed and wait for him, in case he commits a crime? By so planning the plot, John Stein-

beck has definitely forewarned the reader about something to happen on that ranch. But what the reader could not foresee is the end for Lennie. If only Lennie had followed George's instructions: never to have an exchange with that woman. But before all that, if only George has sought to let Lennie face his responsibility in the past, both of them would not be facing such destructive consequences. For sure, the sentence for sexual harassment Lennie would have endured would not be death. But since the man is let to escape every situation he has caused, there is no surprise that he should cause higher situations. The protected love showed by George on Lennie, has caused the latter to continue lacking control over his emotions and attitudes, both towards humans and animals. And the resulting consequence has been death, both by him and on him.

### 3.2. George's Killing Lennie for Love and Protection

In the plot, John shows the companionship both protagonists living together though having separate mindset. George has always warned Lennie from doing anything stupid but Lennie go through it and do even worst. He has loved Lennie because he was more than a brother to him. Lennie in his stubborn attitudes continues messing up. George would protect him from anybody who wants to do him bad. "Ain'tgonna let em hurt Lennie" said George. Curley would like to take revenge for his wife's death, so would the other guys too. Curley asserted: "I'll kill the big son of a bitch myself" (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 92). But in the end this same protected love, has led George to kill Lennie.

After it has been concluded that the murderer of his wife is Lennie, Curly has become angry and ready to commit a crime, but rather than killing Lennie immediately he would surely cause harm to Lennie, he could torture him, and Lennie would suffer before dying, and George would not stand seeing Lennie suffer, although he knows, his brother must die. George could have lied on the location of Lennie after his crime.

Had George been able to get rid of those people running after Lennie, he would surely have joined his brother on board the river, so that they would run away for meeting their dream. George also has had the possibility to drive Lennie's pursuers away; but by so doing, he will have to stay with those people, abandoning Lennie, whom it is known, is not capable of surviving a little while away from George. Leading those pursuers to Lennie has then been a very difficult decision from George. And choosing to step forward and settle the matter before the arrival of the angry men appears as the lesser ill wind. George's shooting at Lennie from the back has made Lennie not to suffer. Lennie could not suspect his killing; they have exchanged again and again about their common project, and his death has come calm, smooth and quick. Had Curley and his people been in charge of the penalty, this would have been really atrocious, painful and pitiful for both the victim, Lennie, and his brother attending it. With Lennie's death, George has lost half of his own life, because he and Lennie has made one person, and it has been impossible for one to live without the other.

With Lennie's death, both their dreams, the American dreams vanished away and forever.

### **3.3. Curley's Wife Loneliness and Death: A Consequence of Her Husband's Selfishness**

Curley is the son of the owner of the ranch, and he's not compassionate at all to the men in the ranch working for his father. But Curley, possessive love has led his wife's death. He will not accord the lady the kind of affection she wants, and at the same time, he would not let her chat with the men on the ranch. The woman now sees herself lonesome and isolated, which she cannot understand nor accept. "Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely" (Steinbeck, 1937: p. 83). She has had her own dreams; she would become a Hollywood star, but everything has collapsed.

Curley's wife has been presented as an "innocent victim", trapped by circumstances, since she has never dreamed of such a life she has lived with her husband. There are reasons for her choice of marrying Curley, but finally she realizes her mistake because she has wished to become a film actress. She has always lives under grief and sorrow. The kind of life she has had to live with Curly hurts her; she could not be seen talking with a man on the ranch. Every time Curley missed his wife, he will immediately run to the ranch men's doors and check. All the same, every time she could get out of her husband's eye sight, she would run to the men. Studying the woman's attitude on the ranch, George has smelled the rat. All the men then have to run from her, and the only innocent man she can speak her mind to, happen to be her innocent murderer. Curley's wife's love experience could be compared to that of Janie, the main protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, when Janie has lived with Joe Starks at Eatonville; Jody would never let Janie chat with people, and has had to have very limited exchanges with customers visiting the shop she was ruling. Janie is then emotionally isolated, but contrarily to Curley's wife, Janie has survived, while Jody has passed away, out of selfishness and exaggerated self-esteem.

## **4. Discussion**

During the great depression in America, many authors have written books to illustrate and demonstrate the atrocities of that period in the Americans life. They uplifted each different literary theory according to the problem America went by. American literary criticism prior to the rise of "New Criticism in the United States tended to practice traditional literary history: tracking influence, establishing the canon of major writers in the literary periods, and clarifying historical context and allusions within the text. "The 'New Criticism' so designated as to indicate a break with traditional methods, was a product of the American university in the 1930s and 40s. Authors have decided not to refer back to the old theory since America during the great depression upraised a serious matter

different in form, style and particularly in the period” (Gates, 1989).

New Critics were then born, like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and W. K. Wimsatt placing a similar focus on the metaphysical poets and poetry in general, a genre well suited to New Critical practice. The New Criticism aimed at bringing a greater intellectual rigor to literary studies, confining itself to careful scrutiny of the text alone and the formal structures of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and metaphor, among others. It coincides with the Harlem renaissance (Black Americans circle of literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in the late of 1930s when the black vicious circle became as well a threat to America, because terror, crime, injustice and all bad deeds happened and authors on the spot like “Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hugues and T. S. Eliot and many others present a global view with different theories during that period to map the American crisis” (Essien, 1962). The theory applied to the present study is structuralism which concentrates more and suits the 19<sup>th</sup> century, period of hard time in the Americans’ life as denoted by John Steinbeck in his fictional book *Of Mice and Men*.

## 5. Conclusion

John Steinbeck through his novel *Of Mice and Men* has sought to explore the themes that accounted for Americans’ as a whole, and African Americans’ life and aspirations in particular, at a time when economic disruption in America, has caused social and political decadences through the whole world. The analysis of the book plot during that period of Great Depression in America (1930s), let it emerge a modicum of hope in the American citizens who, on the bases of the civil war and both internal and external conflicts over the country, have continued to strive and develop new strategies for unifying all Americans without any racial and gender based prejudice. In the book, the two main protagonists, Gorge Money and Lennie Little have emerged with contradictions within themselves and with each other. Indeed, George Money is poor, and Lennie Little is a big man; George is mean, but intelligent and the protector of Lennie, who cannot decide on his own, except for making troubles inadvertently. The two characters in their differences represent in actual fact, the white man and the black man in description, having to live in accommodation and having to tolerate each other, having to lift the challenges together, having to unit so that the American dreams will be possible. But the American dream will never become true until the stronger will act and decide accordingly. George’s protective love for Lennie, which has turned into destruction, is also an address to the Blacks that, they should not always see the White man’s reaction against them; they also have to inquire into the fellow Blacks attitudes, and let them face their responsibility, if such is that they must become part and parcel of the American society. Curley’s wife loneliness expresses women status in America during the great depression. By portraying his main characters as criminals and always on the run, Steinbeck seeks to tell about black Americans’ responsibility in the negative approach to their



living in this country they have contributed in building and making one of the most prosperous in the world. Steinbeck is then going along with “James Baldwin who, through his essay *The Fire Next Time*, has clearly expressed his opinion about an effective cohabitation and collaboration between Blacks and Whites in America” (Kombieni & Nassourou, 2018). For Baldwin, indeed, the Blacks negative condition in the post emancipation America is not at the sole responsibility of the Whites, since Blacks were referring to racism against the Whites as a means of survival in America, with Elijah Mohamad’s religious anti-whites practices as well as the blacks pastors and their followers’ attitudes vis-à-vis the Whites. As Baldwin puts it as a concluding and warning message, Blacks must show love to the Whites so that the latter will learn about the goodness in love and the necessity of peaceful collaboration of both Blacks and Whites in America.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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