

THE LITERARY ANALYSIS OF JOHN STEINBECK'S NOVEL OF MICE AND MEN

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ABSTRACT

*This research article provides a comprehensive literary analysis of John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), exploring its thematic structure, character development, symbolic framework, stylistic features, and socio-historical context. Steinbeck's realistic portrayal of itinerant workers during the Great Depression reveals complex issues such as loneliness, broken dreams, marginalization, and the fragility of human relationships. The study applies descriptive, analytical, and comparative literary methodologies supported by scholarly sources (Benson, 1984; Lisca, 1997; Meyer, 2011). Through close reading, contextual examination, and character-based interpretation, this article aims to show how Steinbeck employs narrative technique and symbolism to construct a tragic yet humanistic vision of life. The findings demonstrate that Steinbeck's use of symbolism, foreshadowing, and naturalistic elements deepens the psychological and social dimensions of the novella.*

INTRODUCTION. John Steinbeck (1902–1968) stands as one of the most influential voices of twentieth-century American literature, recognized for his realistic and socially engaged writing. His works often illuminate the struggles of working-class Americans, particularly during the Great Depression. Published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* is one of Steinbeck's most celebrated novellas, notable for its compact structure, dramatic form, and emotionally charged narrative.

The novella centers on two migrant ranch workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, who travel together seeking employment and aspiring to one day purchase a small farm of their own. Their dream, however, is continuously undermined by economic hardship, psychological limitations, and societal prejudice. Steinbeck's narrative not only depicts the hardships faced by itinerant workers but also explores universal human themes such as friendship, loneliness, power, and the impossibility of the American Dream. The significance of *Of Mice and Men* lies not merely in its social message but in Steinbeck's mastery of characterization, symbolism, and dialogue. Steinbeck combines elements of realism, naturalism, and modernist narrative technique to create a text that is both simple in style and profound in meaning. This article aims to conduct a deep literary analysis of the novella through thematic, stylistic, and contextual perspectives, aligning the study with recognized academic scholarship.

METHODOLOGY. This research applies qualitative literary analysis, combining several traditional and modern methodologies:

1. **Close Reading Method.** Close reading is used to identify important stylistic features, symbols, motifs, and linguistic elements in the text. As defined by Meyer (2011), close reading focuses on

“the careful, sustained interpretation of a brief passage,” allowing the researcher to detect narrative patterns and rhetorical structures.

2. Historical-Contextual Method. Steinbeck’s novella is deeply rooted in the economic and social realities of the 1930s. The study considers the Great Depression as an essential context influencing the behavior, dreams, and struggles of the characters (Benson, 1984).

3. Thematic Analysis. Themes such as loneliness, dreams, marginalization, violence, and friendship are studied through descriptive and analytical comparison. According to Abrams (1999), thematic criticism reveals how ideas function within narrative structures.

4. Character Analysis. This method explains psychological motivations and symbolic significance of key characters (George, Lennie, Curley’s wife, Crooks, Candy). Lisca (1997) emphasizes that Steinbeck’s characters should be read as representations of broader human and social conditions.

5. Symbolic Interpretation. Symbolism is essential in the novella — animals, hands, the dream farm, and the bunkhouse all carry metaphorical meaning. The analysis applies principles of symbolic criticism (Frye, 1969).

Each method contributes to a holistic and multi-layered understanding of *Of Mice and Men*.

ANALYSIS. 1. Social and Historical Background. The novella is set during the Great Depression, when thousands of men traveled across California in search of temporary ranch work. Steinbeck himself worked alongside migrant laborers and witnessed their hardships firsthand. The era was marked by unemployment, poverty, racial discrimination, and loss of hope — all of which shape the characters and conflicts of the novella. George and Lennie symbolize the rare companionship among workers who often remained isolated. Steinbeck’s realism captures economic brutality while exposing the emotional cost of instability.

2. Character Analysis. George Milton. George is small, intelligent, and protective. He represents rationality and responsibility. His dream of owning land is not merely economic — it symbolizes dignity and independence, ideals often denied to working-class men.

Lennie Small. Lennie embodies innocence and physical power, a tragic contradiction. His mental disability makes him dependent on George and vulnerable to misunderstanding. Lennie’s love for soft things foreshadows both beauty and destruction in the story. His character reflects Steinbeck’s interest in naturalism, where environment and biology shape human fate.

Curley’s Wife. Though unnamed, she symbolizes the marginalization of women in 1930s America. She is lonely, objectified, and denied identity. Her death becomes a turning point that destroys the fragile shared dream of the protagonists.

Crooks. As the only Black character, Crooks reveals racial segregation and social isolation. His loneliness and desire for companionship reflect broader themes of injustice.

Candy. Old and disabled, Candy fears becoming useless — a symbol of ageism and disposability in capitalist society. His attachment to the dream farm shows his longing for belonging.

3. Themes. a. Loneliness. Loneliness pervades the ranch environment. Every character suffers from emotional isolation. Steinbeck uses setting (the bunkhouse, barn) to emphasize isolation as a social condition.

b. Dreams and the American Dream. George and Lennie’s dream represents hope, freedom, and self-determination. Yet Steinbeck suggests that such dreams are fragile and unattainable for

marginalized individuals during the Depression. The dream collapses with Lennie's death, symbolizing the failure of the American Dream for the working class.

c. Power and Weakness. Characters exercise power through physical strength, social status, race, or gender. Curley uses aggression, while Lennie's strength is uncontrolled. Crooks lacks power due to racial exclusion. Steinbeck critiques the structures that enforce inequality.

d. Friendship. The bond between George and Lennie is rare and precious. Their companionship challenges the norm of isolation. George's final decision to shoot Lennie can be read as an act of mercy, love, and protection — a tragic, morally ambiguous conclusion.

4. Symbolism. a. Animals. Animals represent innocence, vulnerability, and foreshadowing. The death of Candy's dog mirrors Lennie's fate. Rabbits embody Lennie's dream and childlike imagination.

b. Hands. Steinbeck repeatedly uses "hands" to symbolize power, work, and identity. Curley's "glove full of Vaseline" hints at toxic masculinity; Lennie's hands are strong yet uncontrollable.

c. The Farm Dream. The farm is a mythic symbol — a paradise where characters would escape economic exploitation and social loneliness. It symbolizes hope, but also illusion.

d. Setting. The circular structure — beginning and ending at the Salinas River — symbolizes the inescapable cycle of hardship and tragedy.

5. Narrative Technique. Steinbeck writes the novella like a play: short scenes, minimal narration, visual dialogue. The language is colloquial, reflecting working-class speech. Foreshadowing is a central technique — early events hint at later tragedy (e.g., the mouse, the puppy, Candy's dog). His style blends realism with naturalistic determinism: characters are shaped by forces beyond their control.

CONCLUSION. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* remains a powerful and timeless work of American literature. Through vivid characters, symbolic storytelling, and precise narrative structure, Steinbeck exposes the harsh realities faced by migrant workers and critiques society's treatment of the weak and marginalized. Themes of loneliness, broken dreams, friendship, and human vulnerability resonate across generations. The novella demonstrates how social structures during the Great Depression limited human potential and destroyed personal hopes. Steinbeck's blend of realism and naturalism reveals that individuals often struggle against forces—economic, biological, or social—that exceed their control. Despite this tragic worldview, Steinbeck emphasizes the beauty and importance of companionship, suggesting that human dignity is found not in success but in connection.

This article's analysis shows that *Of Mice and Men* is not merely a story of two workers but a profound exploration of human experience. Steinbeck's artistry ensures the novella's lasting relevance for readers, scholars, and students of literature.

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