

**DISABILITY STUDIES IN STEINBECK'S *OF MICE AND MEN***

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Often do the physically/mentally disabled withdraw into themselves, feel lonely and depressed, and for them, the problem of integrating themselves into society is not always a smooth transition. Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men* offers a platform for us to look at this aspect of disability studies. Certainly, the novel is interested in how modular groups of people, even two men or two living beings together, formulate effective myths of social cohesion. There are two human beings in this novel representing the disabled, the mentally retarded Lennie Small and the physically debilitated old Candy, yearning for companionship. Steinbeck puts forward no great theories about loneliness or disability in this novel and is content merely to state and illustrate its presence. If he does make a point, it is that warmth and companionship are as vital to a human being as food and water, more so in the case of the disabled-cum-marginalized.

Keywords: *Disability Studies, Human Beings, Loneliness, Companionship, Marginalized, Racial Prejudice.*

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Human beings may strive to develop independence of mind and spirit to enable them to look upon mankind and its affairs without being swayed either by custom or by other people's conventional ideas of right and wrong. However, human beings have to be interdependent for a happy, healthy and peaceful existence. Nietzsche's existentialist axiom that "existence precedes essence" has, it appears, overshot its purpose. Jet-setting coupled with high-tech civilization has made some of us realize now that it is the duty of future generations to hold the torch of life aloft burning more brightly. This realization has the force of a religion though some may claim that it is based on reason, not on faith. This is the implicit message that we get from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Such expressions as 'man is gregarious' and 'man is a social animal' can never get clichéd. Rather it is increasingly becoming more relevant in the present global context where units of family are breaking into self-serving islands. So man needs company and understanding from fellow beings. Man has now been forced to realize that 'co-existence precedes existence'. Even as normal human beings need warmth and companionship, the new formula assumes more significance and relevance to the problems of the disabled. Often do the physically/mentally disabled withdraw into themselves, feel lonely and depressed, and yearn for equality in treatment and companionship with fellow beings. If necessary, they turn to pet animals like dogs and find an easy and consoling identity with the animals. Despite all such euphemistic rhetoric as 'the otherwise abled', 'the differently abled' or 'the special people', for the disabled, the problem of integrating themselves into society is not always a smooth transition. Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men* offers a platform for us to look at this aspect of disability studies. Certainly, the novel is interested in how modular groups of people, even two men or two living beings together, formulate effective myths of social cohesion.

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a novel of compassion and mainly a novel about two men, George Milton and Lennie Small, with a tragic dream, the dream of a farm. Of the two, Milton is intelligent and quick-witted, "small and quick" (2). He is a kind,

soft-hearted person. He remains just a ranch-hand for two reasons: one is simply economic as he cannot buy his own ranch and the other reason why George remains so is Lennie. The other, Lennie Small is mentally retarded but "strong as bull" (23) and George's opposite. He is a huge man with immense strength, "shapeless 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 and only moved because the heavy hands were pendula" (2). Lennie is a half-wit, a simpleton, suffering from a mental disability but also a "nice fella". The only way he can survive is to be like a tame dog, always tethered to his master George, and never let out of his sight.

If George is to look after Lennie, wandering around the ranches is probably the only way they can keep together. A long stay in one area simply increases the chances of Lennie doing something wrong, and permanent employment would be too risky. Certainly George looks after Lennie because he is a good, kind, loyal person, but he also does it because the relationship gives him something he desperately needs. Undoubtedly, George has come to like Lennie, and feels a sense of duty and responsibility towards him. But there is more to their partnership than this. Lennie needs George and would be lost without him, but it is equally true to say that George needs Lennie. George and Lennie have each other, and can thus stave off the pangs of loneliness that afflict all other ranch hands in the Salinas Valley. The ranch hands, George says, "are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place" (14).

Lennie is in the habit of killing his pet like mice by way of stroking them hard to death. Like a child, he loves soft things, but when he pets them, they somehow get "broken". His boss's daughter-in-law and Curley's wife lacks companionship and feels lonely. Loneliness drives her to the mentally-retarded Lennie and she invites him into a conversation: "Why can't I talk to you? I never got to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely" (91). She seduces him to stroke her hair as he stroked the puppy. She panics when Lennie holds on too tightly. She dies as he breaks her neck. Lennie has done many wrongs before and escaped



unscathed with the help of George. At one stage, George bursts out "you can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job. ... You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out" (12). Lennie kneels and implores: "...without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace" (13). They are so interdependent that they forge a very strong emotional bond that moves even the retarded Lennie. But Lennie cannot be allowed to run away this time, for now he has murdered someone. George is full of compassion, and it is this that makes him prefer a clean death for Lennie, rather than a lynching or locking him up for life. George is a realist and knows the world, and so he knows that society will not let Lennie get away this time. George has made sacrifices in order to look after Lennie. When he kills Lennie, he makes the greatest sacrifice of all. Lennie should be tethered to George for his existence with the little happiness that he draws from the company of George. Or Death should take him away from the society in order to save him from lapsing into abysmal loneliness and depression. To George, the loss of his only companion means his self-sacrifice too as he prefers to lapse into such loneliness. And he goes off to a future without Lennie, -- and with the dream unrealized.

Many may argue that Lennie would not have been allowed to roam with George, but would have been locked up in an asylum from the start or at the least a special school. However, George is a humanist and his humanistic approach granting the things that would make Lennie's life truly fulfilling to the extent possible is definitely far better than any kind of treatment in an asylum or in a special school. George shoots Lennie because of consideration for him and instant death at George's hands is the kindest thing that can happen to Lennie after what he has done. There is George's care for Lennie and his compassion and Lennie's unaffected love for George. Steinbeck intends Lennie to convey the readers that Lennie was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men.

In the same novel *Of Mice and Men*, there are two more ranch-hands Candy and Crooks who suffer from physical disability. Candy is a tall, stoop-shouldered old man. He has lost his right hand in a farm accident and is now reduced to the meanest job

on the ranch, that of 'swamper'. His function in the novel is to show the reader what happens to an old man beset by physical disability, loneliness, and rejection. He is a pathetic figure. As he says, "a guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody... I tell ya a guy too lonely an' he gets sick" (76-77). He has lost all control over his life, and can only pass his time by being subservient to others, and getting his own back on them by gossip. He clings to his dog as George and Lennie do to each other. He provides a parallel to them. Candy and his dog illustrate the theme of the plight of the crippled in their old age.

Steinbeck says that old people are thrown out like rubbish when they have outlived their usefulness. When Candy is too old to swamp out the bunk-house, he will be dismissed, with no one to care for him. In his words, "I won't have no place to go, an' I can't get no more jobs" (64). He has "a drag-footed sheep-dog, grey of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes" (25). When the old and disabled Candy doesn't know how to circumvent loneliness and when nobody is eager to give him company, he turns to the old dog for company. The dog presents a pathetic sight but its presence is needed for Candy to feel like living. Carlson, a rancher, urges Candy to dispose of his "ancient dog with mild, half-blind eyes" (39). When Candy refuses to oblige, finally Carlson shoots the old pet dog to death. Perhaps it has put the dog out of its misery, but it has increased Candy's. When the dog is no more now, he is again bereft of the little comfort and companionship that the dog gave him. The dog's death aggravated his loneliness. Even as normal human beings are in need of such essentials as warmth and fellow-feelingness, the mentally or physically disabled, while being preoccupied with their own prejudices and predispositions, feel like edged out of our midst and collapse like a structure without a prop. Ironically, to Candy (which means a sweet) life is bitter to the taste. Candy is one of the best examples of Steinbeck's compassion and sympathy for the old, the weak, and the downtrodden. Steinbeck seems to be demanding a more dignified treatment for the disabled, one that allows them to retain their self-respect.

Crooks is "a stable buck and a cripple" and "a proud, aloof man" (70). "His body was bent over



to the left by his crooked spine, and his eyes lay deep in his head. . . . His lean face was lined with deep black wrinkles, and he had thin, pain-tightened lips which were lighter than his face" (70-71). Like Candy, Crooks is an example of Steinbeck's compassion, and a further illustration of the way in which loneliness can corrupt and destroy a man. He has a double burden in that he is not only a cripple but also a negro in a society that will not recognize negroes as anything approaching an equal. Thus Candy and Crooks are examples of a different kind of loneliness, that of the cripple and the misfit. Candy is lonely because he has lost a hand and because he is old, past his prime, and has no one to care for him. Crooks is lonely because society shuns a cripple and a negro, counting for nothing the intelligence that lies beneath his skin and his deformity.

Crooks obviously illustrates one aspect of racial prejudice. He reads books, is intelligent, and, like any human being, needs warmth and companionship. Yet he is denied these, not because of any inherent fault, but because he is a cripple and a negro. He is an intelligent man denied any outlet for his abilities. In the words of Steinbeck, "Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego -- nothing to arouse either like or dislike" (85). Loneliness affects these two men in different ways. It makes Candy turn to his dog, until even that is taken away from him, and Crooks is forced behind a defensive barrier of cynicism and dull obedience, his brain seething all the while. Steinbeck puts forward no great theories about loneliness or disability in this novel and is content merely to state and illustrate its presence. The overriding feature that emerges from his vision of disability and loneliness is the feeling of compassion and sympathy for those so afflicted by them. If he does make a point, it is that warmth and human companionship are as vital to a human being as food and water, more so in the case of the disabled-cum-marginalized.

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