

Camaraderie: choosing a person's destiny

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Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath, two novels published concurrently by John Steinbeck, both depict camaraderie between dust bowl migrants. The main characters in Of Mice and Men, George and Lennie, form a bond, while struggling to reach their goal, a small farm. Similarly, Jim Casy of The Grapes of Wrath befriends Tom Joad, a friendship eventually uplifting the whole migrant community. Outwardly, the two relationships may seem to parallel each other. In reality, these alliances differ greatly. Consequently, in Of Mice and Men, friendship leads to destruction, in The Grapes of Wrath, salvation. Starkly contrasting George and Lennie's relationship in Of Mice and Men to Tom and Jim Casy's in The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck unquestionably shows that camaraderie decides an individual's fate.

To begin, George and Lennie interact quite differently from Tom and Casy; the former share a master-slave relationship, while the latter, a more equal relationship. For instance, George orders Lennie to "say nothing" (6), upon reaching the ranch where they will work, fearing that if "[the boss] finds out what a crazy bastard [Lennie is], [they] won't get no job" (6). Lennie obeys. Later on, when Lennie innocently calls Curley's wife, the flirtatious daughter-in-law of the ranch owner, "purty" (32), George fiercely admonishes Lennie to not "even look at that bitch" (32), once again demonstrating a master-slave relationship. In contrast, Tom and Casy, engage in an equal relationship; in fact, Tom candidly tells Casy, a one-time preacher, now philosopher, his opinion of Casy's philosophy, throughout The Grapes of Wrath. For example, when Casy explains to Tom his idea that "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of" (33), Tom openly replies, "you can't hold no church with idears like that" (33). Moreover, Casy never forces

Tom to do anything, contrasting their relationship to George and Lennie's relationship. Actually, at the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Casy only requests Tom to “- tell the folks [in the ranch] how it is – Tell 'em their starvin' [the protesters] an' stabbin' theirself in the back” (523); Tom replies “ I'll try to get to tell the folks” (523). Clearly, Tom and Casy's equal relationship sets them apart from George and Lennie's master-slave interaction. These relationships, in turn, decide the fate of the respective characters.

Not only do the relationships contrast each other, they also shape the people involved differently. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad transforms from self-centered person to a martyr for all “ Okie” (280) people, because of his companionship with Casy. Initially, a very hedonistic Tom remarks, “ Maybe I should of been a preacher – I been a long time without a girl” (31). This self-indulgent outlook gives way to a broader, all-encompassing attitude, as Casy's philosophy influences him. Before leaving his family, in the concluding chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom explains to his mother, “ Maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but a big piece of one” (572), he even adds “ God, I'm talkin' like Casy – comes to thinkin' about him so much” (572). Obviously, Tom's camaraderie with Casy transforms Tom for the better; however, in *Of Mice and Men*, George virtually crushes Lennie's free will, making Lennie completely dependent upon him. For example, Lennie initially threatens to “ go off in the hills an' find a cave” (12), whenever George treats him cruelly; thereby, Lennie exerts a measure of freedom. However, as the story progresses, Lennie seems to have no will of his own. In fact, when Curley, the ranch owner's belligerent son, fights with

Lennie, George must command Lennie to “ get ‘ im” (63); subsequently, when Lennie nearly kills Curley, George must order Lennie to “ leggo of him” (63). Therefore, Lennie’s transformation reflects his relationship with George, a master-slave partnership, transforming Lennie for the worse. Later on, in each novel, the deaths that occur reflect the wide gulf between the respective associations.

Finally, Casy and Lennie’s deaths contrastingly impact each relationship; Lennie’s death for the worse, Casy’s death for the better. In *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie’s unswerving devotion to George leads to his own death, when Curley’s wife flirts with him. At first, Lennie scorns her advances saying “[if] George sees me talkin’ to you, he’ll give me hell” (87). Curley’s wife persists, even letting Lennie stroke her hair. When Lennie pulls too hard on her hair, she begins to scream, scaring Lennie; Lennie believes that if George hears her screaming, George won’t let him “ tend the rabbits”(87), at their dream ranch. In a moment of confusion, Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife; then, he goes to “ hide in the brush till [George] comes” (92), carrying out George’s instructions to the letter. Sadly, George, Lennie’s so-called friend, shoots Lennie, when he comes to the brush. Lennie’s death sharply contrasts Casy’s death, which inspires Tom to champion the “ Okie”(280) cause. Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, Casy’s philosophy affects Tom subtle ways. Casy’s death acts as a catalyst, making Tom realize the truth behind Casy’s theories. However, both deaths influence the respective relationships differently; Lennie’s negatively, Casy’s positively.

Thus, John Steinbeck deliberately contrasts George and Lennie's master-slave relationship to Tom and Casy's equal relationship, to show that camaraderie shapes a character's fate. Both Casy and George cause changes in Tom and Lennie, respectively. However, Tom changes from a hedonistic individual to a martyr for the "Okie"(280) peoples; contrastingly, George affects a negative change in Lennie. Lennie, who has some degree of free will initially, becomes completely dependent upon George. In both cases, the old adage, "Beware of the company you keep" holds true, for the company the characters keep eventually transforms them for the better or for the worse.