

# Impairment and mental "illness" in of mice and men

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Throughout history, those who are not on level with those around them tend to be neglected. This is a trend seen among animals as the runt of a litter gets killed, eaten, or left behind, and is seen among humans as the mentally challenged or physically handicapped are treated differently and sometimes sent off to separated facilities to be dealt with. Although the treatment of lesser equipped animals has stayed the same over time, it has drastically changed for humans as they have raised the standard of living for those with mental and physical disabilities. Even though they are not yet treated as equals to non-handicapped people, their lifestyle has drastically changed from being abandoned in an inhuman "treatment" facility, to aided integration into daily life—enough at least for them to function semi-independently, with minor supervision or aid. In comparison to typical treatment of the mentally challenged during the depression era, Lennie, a central character in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, was quite pampered by his friend George.

What people define as "mentally challenged" varies between person to person. According to a medical dictionary, "the United States Government defines a disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of an individual's major life activities' this includes both those individuals with a record of an impairment and those regarded as having such an impairment" ("Mentally Challenged"). It also says, "The World Health Organization defines disability as loss of function at the level of the whole person, which may include inability to communicate or to perform mobility, activities of daily living, or necessary vocational or avocational activities; rehabilitation is aimed at teaching patients to remediate or

compensate and thus maximize functional independence" ("Mentally Challenged"). So, as it will be defined in this paper, mentally challenged will be used in reference to people who have an inability to function normally in everyday life without aid. This applies most specifically to Lennie, who would not be able to continue working on a ranch successfully without George's guidance.

Of Mice and Men is set during the depression era in the United States, where and when it was written by the author, John Steinbeck. It takes place at a ranch and its surrounding areas. It starts off with Lennie and George after getting kicked off their bus. They are walking through the area as they head to the next ranch they're going to be employed at. They are "a few miles south of Soledad" (Steinbeck 1) by the Salinas River. It is spring based on the condition of the area, with the "willows fresh and green" (Steinbeck 1) and the "debris of the winter's flooding" (Steinbeck 1) going through the river. Here by the river is where the two men initiate their journey, and where they promise to meet up if anything happens at this new ranch they're going to. This is also a well-placed location so that when George shoots Lennie it is still in a near enough proximity for the ranchers to hear the shot.

Lennie is a slow, strong, and kind human being who is violent unintentionally. Lennie was "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders" (Steinbeck 2). 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" (Steinbeck 2), showing he, like a large animal, is strong, but not graceful or quick (mentally or physically). He is also

quite fond of soft, pretty things, such as rodents, bunnies, and women. When he is first introduced, he is discovered keeping a mouse in his pocket to stroke and is later chastised for killing it and even going into a lake to retrieve it when lost. He was driven from the previous ranch he was employed at because he grabbed a girl and she claimed rape, and he was driven from the current ranch for accidentally breaking the boss's son's wife's neck. George is a strong character, like Lennie, and comes across as his foil. He is the one who keeps Lennie in line and watches out for the both of them. He is the reason they have a goal in life, a job, income, and a future ahead. George is a smart, cunning, and calculating human being who is Lennie's sole caretaker in life. He was the opposite of Lennie by how he "was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose" (Steinbeck 2). By taking on this role he puts his own life and career in danger in order to maintain the stability of his friend. He admits to how he used to bully Lennie. He would "play jokes on 'im cause he was too dumb to take care of 'imself. But he was too dumb to even know he had a joke played on him" (Steinbeck 40). George would tease Lennie because it made him feel smart in comparison, but eventually stopped as he realized how helpless and confused the poor man was. He tells the story of how he told Lennie to jump into a lake one day, just for fun, but Lennie almost drowned. After trying to drag the man out of the water, he was excessively thankful that George saved his life. This moment of realization at how helpless this fellow human being was, is when the change occurred in George to decide to care for the man. The book depicts kind and loving treatment towards

Lennie. He is quite loved and cared for by George, and his best intentions are always kept in mind. Although what George does at the end of the books can seem quite morbid, especially since this is his best friend, it's actually quite kind of a deed. By shooting Lennie, George is saving the retard from himself. He's keeping Lennie from being tortured or killed in an even worse way. As we see throughout the book, Lennie is quite often the cause of trouble. He's not able to live his life to the fullest because of his mental illness, and because he does not comprehend his own strength. He does not understand many social norms around him, and he quite evidently does not understand the meaning of gentle. Therefore, if he were to continue living, he would've caused even more trouble and would always live his life on the run. George sees this and almost seems to pity him. He takes Lennie's life as a way of helping him out. He saves Lennie from the troubles of ranch life, and the troubles of his own ways. It shows the strong emotional bond between the two men, and how they always look out for each other.

In opposition to Lennie's luxurious treatment, it was common at the time for the mentally challenged to be placed in an asylum where they would be mistreated all their life. It was typical for patients to be tied to bed for days at a time, confined to cells, much like a prison, and left neglected or ignored. As overcrowding occurred in asylums, " patients were sleeping in wooden cribs stacked three patients high. Ice water baths were once again used, along with shock machines and electroconvulsive therapy" (" The History of Mental Illness"). So, the treatment of these asylum patients was quite poor and had degraded quite a bit over the time since they first became prevalent. Hydrotherapy and insulin shock therapy were popular early in the

Great Depression, they “ were popular in the 1930s” (“ 1930-1950: New Therapy”) However, “ these methods gave way to psychotherapy in the 1940s” (“ 1930-1950: New Therapy”) and “ By the 1950s, doctors favored artificial fever therapy and electroshock therapy (“ 1930-1950: New Therapy”). During the time of this book’s setting was also the use of lobotomy. During the great Depression, “ the notorious lobotomy was introduced into American medical culture” (“ The History of Mental Illness”). This procedure is a “ medical procedure where the neural passages from the front of the brain are surgically separated from those in the back of the brain. The common result of this procedure was the patient forgetting their depressing or discouraging feelings or tendencies” (“ The History of Mental Illness”). This was initially a delicate, time consuming process, til Walter J. Freeman was able to figure out how to perform a trans-orbital lobotomy, i. e. where they sick an ice pick under the eye and wiggle it around until they destroy the frontal lobe completely. Overall treatment of the mentally ill was quite brutal at the time, and very far off from how Lennie was treated.

Compared to how the mentally challenged were commonly treated at the time this book takes place, Lennie was quite loved and cared for. He led an almost normal life at a time when that was rare or nonexistent for people with his kind of disability. He received care when others like him were being punished for doing nothing wrong, for just being born different.

## **Works Cited**

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