

# Critical analysis of of mice and men

Literature, Russian Literature



Scarseth is correct in saying that Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a tragedy, yet not in the classic Aristotelian or Shakespearean sense. The majority of the characters in the novel are in stasis. The world is limited around them and results in limited possibilities, and the lack of love and friendship both contribute to them being stuck.

J. A. Cuddon defines tragedy in saying, the overwhelming part about tragedy is the element of hopelessness, of inevitability...Tragedy is a disaster that happens to other people, and the greater the person, so it seems, the more acute is their tragedy (Cuddon). Yet this acute tragedy is found when the lowliest of lowly exploited people fail to become anything more. The characters are inevitably lead to disappointment, because of their social status, inabilities due to the world's limitations, and even the time period which plays a part in their struggles. A release from this cycle is hopeless.

The struggle of limitation and constraint is a clear message that Steinbeck portrays through many of the characters. Scarseth is quick to notice and comment on this theme, though he only discusses the explicitly mentioned limited characters. Curley, as Scarseth mentions, is very limited. Curley doesn't know how to hold on to what he finds important: his young wife, his status as the Boss's son, his reputation as a man [his] aim to be a respected husband/boss/man is foiled by his own limited abilities (Scarseth). Curley is stuck in his place. He, on paper, has the most power on the ranch compared to most of the other men. He is the boss son, rich, is able to boast about his wife, ...a sex object, a status symbol...the sexuality of the relationship (Scarseth), but he is lost. His aggressiveness and unforgiving attitude on life puts him into the same cycle of anger. Curley's wife, one of the most

marginalized characters, evident by the name she is called and her gender, is also brought up by Scarseth. She is a lost little girl in a world of men whose knowledge of women is largely limited (Scarseth).

She is called names, teased, and has no power, and is limited due to Curley. Scarseth also writes about George, Lennie, and their limitations, saying ... [the] aim of Lennie and George to have a small place...is doomed to frustration also by their own limitations (Scarseth). Lennie, being his poor dumb big (Scarseth) self cannot have his dream with George come true. The world limits this. However, Scarseth doesn't bring up the fact other characters can be limited, such as Slim. Slim is described as having God-Like eyes, (Steinbeck 40), he is the prince of the ranch [moving] with a majesty only achieved by royalty and a master craftsman, (Steinbeck 33) and that his opinions were law. (Steinbeck 45) Everyone respects Slim and considers him the highest in ranking. But why isn't he the boss? Slim seems like he has so much power on the farm, but he's just a farm worker. He doesn't have power in the outside world, and all he is able to achieve is making Curley tell everyone his hand was hurt in the machine. He isn't anything outside of the labor and respect on the farm, and is exploited along with the other workers. Holding positions of power don't always equate to being unlimited. The tragedy in the novel is due to the characters inability to improve, gain, to come close in achieving their dreams, goals, or succeed because of their limitations.

Friendship, love, and themes of dreams (Scarseth) are all mentioned in Scarseth's analysis. He argues that they are what *Of Mice and Men* is all

about. But there are few friendships or expression of love in the novel, so this cannot be true. George and Lennie have the only friendly relationship in the novel, but they do not love each other. The codependency of it is beneficial to Lennie alone. George helps keep him alive. There is no emotion or loving support, no attachment is present. This is emphasized when George explodes and says ...if I was alone I could live so easy...you keep me in hot water all the time (Steinbeck 11) and calls him names. Scarseth also mentions that George and Lennie as friends share a good dream (Scarseth). However, this dream isnt good, nor attainable. If their relationship isnt a two-sided one, this dream could never come true or be attainable in their limited world, and George comes to learn this. The men in the bunkhouse with George and Lennie share no intimacy either; their relationships consist of working, sleeping, and getting by day by day. The only example of a bond is when the men go to the whorehouse and play cards, but there still is no friendship present. Another example of the absence of love is with Curley and his wife. They have no care for each other or share a bond aside from the rings on their fingers. Curley uses his wife, labeled as his, for sexual pleasure and boasting. In turn, she is lonely. She [would] like to talk to somebody ever once in a while (Steinbeck 77), and Curley is just so caught up in himself and his own limitations that she was nobody. With no one to turn to and confide in, the characters are limited in themselves because of this lack of love, and limits what they can do.

The fact that the book is a tragedy, yet not in the classic sense, is a direct result of the limitations of the characters and the lack of friendship and love in their relationships. Time and time again the characters fall into their fate,

despair and the inability to overcome their limitations. But both Scarseth and Steinbeck are trying to prove the same point: tragedy can befall any man or any woman, and *Of Mice and Men* is a tragedy. Disappointment, suffering, and incapability is a reality for all of humanity. Sometimes the most tragic is to see the ones who are not as great become frozen in that struggle. And this will always happen. Steinbeck shows this through many different issues with society; racism, sexism, mistreatment of the mentally disabled, and even just with farm workers and their exploitation. Anyone, even the lowest of low can experience tragedy, and in *Of Mice and Men*, it is due to their limitations and the world's limitations and the absence of love and friendship. Steinbeck himself provides the thought that represents the tragedy of the novel best: Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkin about it, but it's just in their head (Steinbeck 74)

## **Works Cited**

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York, N. Y., U. S. A.: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.

Scarseth, Thomas.