

Power and impairment: comparing "johnny bear" and of mice and men

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



John Steinbeck incorporates disabilities within his stories with characters like Johnny Bear and Lennie Small from his works and "Johnny Bear" Of Mice and Men. Lennie from Of Mice and Men is a mentally handicapped giant of a man who has the very simple life goal of having a rabbit farm. Johnny, much like Lennie has a mental inadequacy. Unlike Lennie, Johnny has other goals, ambitions, and means to get them. However when both use their power without restraint or reason it ultimately leads to their demise. Steinbeck makes disabilities into a conflict between characters in his works "Johnny Bear" and Of Mice and Men.

Steinbeck incorporates the character Johnny, the main conflict in the short story "Johnny Bear," who has a disability that makes him not intelligent; however, he applies his one major skill to achieve what he wants in life. The narration describes Johnny Bear is as not "[having] brains enough to make anything up" ("Johnny Bear" 105), and thus characterizes him as not having much intelligence but relying on his natural skill to go through day to day life. Johnny is also described as being "like an animal" ("Johnny Bear" 107) which displays him going off of instinct instead of intelligence. Johnny compensates for his lack of intellect with his special imitation skill. Johnny's skill is so developed to the point that it is as if the person he was imitating's voice is "coming out of the throat of Johnny Bear, [their] words, [their] intonation" ("Johnny Bear" 104). Even though his disability is that he can not think for himself, he engages his physical skill to push past his impairments to get what he wants. The one thing that Johnny Bear wants is whisky. When Johnny activates his imitation skill he expects whisky as payment and goes "from face to face expectantly, and as[ks], 'Whisky?'" ("Johnny Bear" 104).

This occurs many times throughout the story, and the only words of his own are " Whisky?" (" Johnny Bear" 104), which depicts how that is all that he wants and he will abuse his natural skill to acquire what it. When Johnny Bear is " on business [he] move[s] like [there is] no movement at all... [even] dogs are afraid of Johnny" (" Johnny Bear" 105). Johnny applies his physical talent as though it is his business and the currency he lives to earn is alcohol. Johnny may not be very intelligent even to a normal human level, but like an animal he uses physical talent to overcome his mental challenges to accomplish his goals.

Steinbeck elsewhere depicts the character of Lennie, who much like Johnny is not rational enough to think for himself, but he uses his physical strength to achieve his dreams. Comparatively, Lennie is not quite as uncivilized as Johnny Bear as seen by his ability to speak. In the beginning, when George is walking and " stop[s] short in the clearing, [...] [Lennie] nearly r[uns] over him"(Of Mice and Men 2; ch. 1). This quote makes it clear that Lennie is not smart. Lennie, unlike Johnny, is able to sometimes think for himself and speak which shows his intellect is greater than Johnny's. Lennie's ability is physical strength and he applies that power to his work. Lennie has been called " Strong as a bull" (Of Mice and Men 22; ch. 2) after doing his bailing work. That, assumedly not a hyperbole, shows his pure strength that he uses throughout the story. Another thing that shows his raw power is that he would " pet [mice], and pretty soon they [bite] [his] fingers and [he] pinched their heads a little and then they d[ied]"(Of Mice and Men 10; ch. 1). He uses his strength to work towards his dream in life which is to own rabbits. Lennie

always is talking about " rabbits"(Of Mice and Men 57; ch. 3) and how he is going to " take care of ' em"(Of Mice and Men 57; ch. 3). This repetition shows how has a longing for rabbits and to take care of them which is in a way his dream. Another thing that is clear is that Lennie knows he can not think for himself very well so he relies on George, which is why he always seeks to stay on Georges good side. Lennie " can't remember nothing that happens, but... remember[s] ever' word [George] say[s]"(Of Mice and Men 103; ch. 6), which displays his want to keep George happy even at the expense of remembering things. One day, when George stands by a river with Lennie and George tells Lennie to jump in and "[Lennie] jumps" and he " near[ly] drown[s] before [George] [can] get him" he " clean forg[ets] that George] told him to jump in" (Of Mice and Men 40; ch. 3). This quote makes clear Lennie's allegiance to George and no matter what he always wants to keep it that way because he knows George intellect is greater than his own. Lennie plans to accomplish his dreams of getting a farm by working, harnessing his strength to his advantage even though he has the disadvantage of his mental limitations. When working Steinbeck describes Lennie as a " hell of a good worker"(Of Mice and Men 22; ch. 2) and " can put up more grain alone than most pairs can" (Of Mice and Men 34; ch. 2). Such content depicts how he has strength far superior to many men. Lennie, even though smarter than Johnny Bear, faces his own challenges but like Johnny he uses his physical ability to overcome such obstacles.

Furthermore, the similarities between Lennie and Johnny Bear grow deeper in the end when the abilities they operate to beat their disabilities get them

in trouble. When Johnny exerts his mimicking without reason, he has no idea what he is saying, so when he says something controversial assault ensues. When the truths that Alex, an acquaintance of the main character, did not want to hear are revealed he beats Johnny up until " Johnny Bear crumple[s]" (" Johnny Bear" 120). This presents that the greatest strength of Johnny leads to his ultimate downfall. On the other hand, Lennie just wants to pet soft things, like mice, and when he ends up killing them because he has no restraints, such a pattern of action leads to his end. Lennie is known to kill many mice over the course of the story but when he kills his puppy he knows he is on the downward slope and is bitter that the dog got " killed [and it] ain't so little as mice [and Lennie] didn't bounce [the dog] hard...now maybe George ain't gonna let [Lennie] tend no rabbits, if he fin's out [the dog] got killed" (Of Mice and Men 85; ch. 5). This clearly shows he doesn't have any grip on his power and when Lennie took petting Curly's wife's hair too far by "[breaking] her neck"(Of Mice and Men 91; ch. 5). yet even though he kills her he still worries that " George gonna say [he] done a bad thing [and George ain't gonna let [Lennie] tend no rabbits"(Of Mice and Men 90; ch. 5). As a result, George has to put him down like an animal out of control. Therefore, Lennie's dream is ended because of his violence that he can not control because of his lack of mental restraint. However, unlike Johnny someone was there for Lennie when they took him out because he had enough mental capacity to be nice and make others like him. In the end " George rais[es] the gun and his hand sh[akes]" yet Lennie still wonders " how's it gonna be... [Lennie and George will] have... [a] little piece [of] alfalfa—' ' For the rabbits"(Of Mice and Men 105; ch. 6). Even when George

has to put down Lennie for getting out of control Lennie still holds on to his dreams until the very end as that is all he can think about as he has his mind set on it. Ironically, what had brought his end is what he tried to use to get his dream. Between Lennie and Johnny, the connection they share is the physical powers that they wield to overcome their disadvantages which also bring the end of their own personal life goals.

Ultimately, Steinbeck portrays characters with mental disabilities to create conflict through their seemingly “ basic” behavior and tendencies. Both Johnny and Lennie and react in a thoughtless manor in an attempt to achieve their own goals. Their attempts prove meaningless because they do not know to conduct themselves in a way that is civil which leads to their undoing. All in all, Steinbeck explores disabilities with characters like Johnny Bear and Lennie Small to create the theme that physical power without mental reason or restraint is a double edged sword.

Works Cited

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin, 1993.

Steinbeck, John. “ Johnny Bear.” *Johnny Bear*, Introduction and Notes by John H. Timmerman, Penguin, 1966, pp. 101-120.