

Of mice and men: film or novel?

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Film adaptations of well known novels often have high expectations to measure up to. It is frequently difficult for directors to translate profound emotions from text to film without causing public disappointment, and the 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is no exception. Set in a California ranch during the Great Depression, Steinbeck recounts the story of two migrant workers, George and Lennie, who set out to find work on a ranch with the dream of making enough money to buy their own farm.

Following a 1939 film rendition of the story, a newer film was released in 1992, directed by Gary Sinise. On the big screen, minor changes made to major characters, themes and imagery sacrifice deeper meaning of the story, crushing some of the most crucial features of the story to better suit the screen. Characters are often an important aspect of Steinbeck novels, thus modifying them in the film consequently defeats their purpose in the story. This change is most evident in Lennie, the mentally handicapped protagonist of the story. His physique is one of the key traits that set him apart from other men at the ranch; therefore alterations to his size also change the manner in which he is treated within the ranch. In Steinbeck's novel, he is described as, " a huge man, shapeless of face, with.

.. sloping shoulders," (2), then his posture is compared to that of a bear; another reference to his size. He towers over all the men, and nobody talks to him with the exception of George and occasionally some others, such as Candy and Slim. Contrastingly, in the film, he is only a few inches taller than the majority of the ranch hands.

Simultaneously, he also stands out more, although in a different way. When the ranch hands head out to the fields to work, Lennie lifts each sack of barley high over his head while other men struggle to pick them up off the ground. Looking on with pride, George, his friend and care taker, nods as other men tell him what a good worker Lennie is. The change from a gangly giant spoken to by no one in the novel to a kind, tall, good worker in the film diminishes the theme of loneliness that Steinbeck conveys through Lennie's ostracism for not looking the same as everyone else. The purpose of Lennie's prominence in the novel is to further display the loneliness of ranch life at the time of the Great depression, and the lives of those at the bottom rung of society, composed of blacks, women, and the mentally and physically handicapped.

Therefore, making Lennie more like other characters in the ranch takes away from this feeling of solitude. Another example of minor changes to a character greatly impacting the story would be the changes the film makes to Curley's wife. Modified both physically and mentally, Curley's wife's character significantly alters the mood of the entire story, especially the ending. Her change begins with her personality. In the novel, she flirts shamelessly with all the ranch hands, even getting angry when they fail to acknowledge her. When she lectures Lennie on what she could have been, he responds by talking about rabbits and this infuriates her.

In addition, she is always described as "heavily made up", wearing mules adorned with "bouquets of red ostrich feathers", a "red housedress" and her "fingernails were red" (31). The makeup is a key piece of symbolism, as it shows her great efforts to get attention from the men and her willingness

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to do anything to get it, and this tendency ultimately leads to her death. Red is also a big part of symbolism on Steinbeck's part. Describing her mules with the red ostrich feathers and her red nails and housedress reveal a part of her personality, as red is often considered the color of fiery passion and love but also of Hell and the Devil. The symbolism of the color red reveals deeper aspects of her character and foreshadows what will eventually happen to her.

Her striking appearance combined with her flirting gives off a seductive yet evil feel. However, contrary to Steinbeck's obvious intention for her to look seductive and monstrous, the film offers her a more natural appearance, losing the red clothes and accessories, sporting a less made-up face, with her hair a frizzy near-black color rather than "hanging in little rolled clusters, like sausages" (31). In addition to reducing her sexual and evil aura, the film portrays her as more lonely than flirtatious, adding a scene of her watching, bored, as Curley pummels a punching bag. Emphasis on her loneliness is also put in nearly every conversation she has with George and Lennie. Furthermore, Curley's wife is significantly kinder in the film, with the entire scene, where she yells at Crooks about getting him hanged, cut from the film.

When she dies, she looks the same, as opposed to in the novel, where she is described to have shed her "meanness and the planning and the discontent and the ache for attention... from her face." (92). Steinbeck also describes her entering the barn at the last scene, writing ".

.. sunshine in the doorway was cut off,” and representing her as a shady character with no good intent. When she dies, the “..

. sun streaks were high on the walls,...lighting up the barn once more.” (93)

This clearly conveys the negativity within her, casting darkness where she goes and the light returning once she dies.

A crucial aspect of her personality is cut off from the movie, as there is no light change in the barn when she enters nor when she dies; her pale pink dress instead rather eye-catching in the shady barn. These changes make her less like the villainous figure in the film, rather displayed as more innocent, lonely and even vulnerable, as pale pink is often associated with babies. Her increase in friendliness and vulnerability in turn makes Lennie seem dangerous, as the woman he kills in the film is more innocent than in the novel, where her personality makes her “ deserve it” a little more. Along with characters, minor changes affect the underlying themes of the story as well, and the director makes little modifications to key moments of the story at the cost of the deeper meaning within this story. The three themes that the film modifies the most are friendship, loneliness and dreams. First off, friendship is one of the major themes of the novel.

It conveys hope during the Great Depression because, regardless of the situations ranch hands were in, at least they had their friends. Friendship is a powerful yet fragile theme, which Steinbeck handles beautifully in the book, crafting a strong relationship between two unlikely friends. In the novel, when George has no other choice but to shoot Lennie, he tries multiple times, dropping his shaking arm with hesitation several times. Steinbeck

writes, “ George raised the gun and his hand shook, and he dropped his hand to the ground again”. He finally manages to shoot Lennie after several tries, then “ shiver[s] and he look[s] at the gun,” (106) then throws it away from him. There is evidently much hesitation involved, conveying raw emotion when he is unable to pick up a gun, whereas he shoots without much hesitation in the film, walking away with a blank expression after it is done, almost like an execution.

Furthermore, the film alters the scene following Lennie’s death. This again affects the theme of friendship, removing the scene where Slim comforts George. The use of this scene in the novel is to demonstrate that while George kills Lennie, at least he has somebody to comfort him. By removing this scene and replacing it with George sitting in the boxcar alone with his memories, the director removes all of the happiness previously established in the story, as even after killing Lennie in the book, Slim reassures him, “. . . you hadda George, I swear you hadda,” (107) then helps him up and promises to bring him out for a drink. Furthermore, the ending of the film is much colder, which leads to the next theme; loneliness. Loneliness is also an important theme in the story, as it is part of Steinbeck’s portrayal of ranch life during the Great Depression. A major display of loneliness in the novel is the scene where Crooks, Candy, Curley’s wife and Lennie gather in the barn, talking about their hopes, dreams and regrets while the others are out on the town town.

This chance meeting seems random, yet it is in fact highly important and full of symbolism. Upon further analysis, one realizes that they represent the

outcasts of society during the Great Depression. Their commonality is their loneliness, and loneliness as a theme is thus reinforced because the four weakest people on the ranch gather to talk about their solitude. As Crooks, the black stable buck says, “ A guy gets too lonely an’ he gets sick.” (73).

This scene is cut completely from the film, thus the film does not properly represent the loneliness of people during the Great Depression, which is Steinbeck’s intention. Finally, the last theme is hope. Steinbeck uses this theme to instill some hope in the story, to show that despite bad circumstances, things can get better. Hope is the driving force for George and Lennie, with their fantasy of the future, which is told like a bedtime story to Lennie. Hope is far more prevalent in the novel than in the film, the novel ending with George talking about their dream, so that Lennie’s last moments are happy.

When George finds Lennie at the end of the novel, George tells him their dream story one more time, killing Lennie only after confirming that they would have the dream very soon. However, in the film, George kills Lennie mid-story, just after Lennie says he’ll “ get to tend the rabbits!”. The theme of dreams is stronger in the novel, as Lennie at least got to finish telling his dream before being shot, symbolically letting George take Lennie to a better place in the end. The fact that he got shot right after saying, “ I’ll get to tend the rabbits!” in the film symbolizes how far fetched a thought it had been, damaging the theme of hope in the story. Imagery is a also very important literary element, and the way the film changes imagery from the novel makes the story lose some of its meaning and symbolism.

First off, the film doesn't portray ranches in the way Steinbeck intended. Like most films, it was made with aesthetics in mind, thus ranch life is romanticized in a nonrealistic way. For example, when George and Lennie first arrive at the ranch in the book, they go straight to the bunkhouse, which is where chapter two starts. The bunkhouse is rundown and "dust-laden..

. and "in and out of the beams flies shot like rushing stars." (18). This less-than-glamorous description of the bunkhouse doesn't quite translate into the film, however. Getting kicked off the bus in the middle of nowhere, Lennie and George start walking.

Lennie and George getting kicked off the bus is the same in the novel and film, however it is just simply mentioned in the novel. The two of them walk through valleys and mountains, arriving at the pool while it's still light out, then enter the ranch the next day with upbeat music in the background and the sun shining down on them. Rather than a dusty and fly filled bunkhouse, the windows let in lots of sunlight, along with a view of trees and fields and antlers mounted on the outside of the house. By presenting ranch life in a more pleasant way than it actually is, the film distracts from Steinbeck's more realistic and harsher depiction of a ranch, which he has lived on before, having himself been a bindle stiff during his twenties. This watered-down version of a California ranch does not represent ranch life in a realistic way, and distracts from the struggle at the time with its music and scenic shots of the ranch.

Another example of a change in imagery occurs in the beginning and end of the story at the pool. The two pool scenes and their differences in the novel

are symbolic for Lennie and George, as their changes also indicate changes in George's and Lennie's life and future. In the first scene, in chapter one, the " water is warm" and there are " willows fresh and green" (1) by the side of the pool, all of that under strong sunlight. This is described when George and Lennie first arrive, both of them filled with hope for the future at their new job. Conversely, when the two are back at the pool for the second time, the mood is notably different, with the sun setting and wind blowing, and with a water snake swimming in the pool.

The pool is described as " deep green" (98), as opposed the sunlit pool described in chapter one, and " a pleasant shade ha[s] fallen." It becomes clear to the reader that something is different, with all of those references to coldness; the snake, cool breeze and the shade. All of these pieces of imagery make the setting significantly darker, and it foreshadows what happens next perfectly. In the film however, the director decides to cut this scene, instead showing Lennie killed in broad daylight. The consequence of this choice is the loss of the foreshadowing precisely manifested by the book's difference in imagery, which consequently makes Lennie's death seem quite inappropriate. Ultimately, the seemingly minor modifications made to aspects of the film destroy some of the deep emotions Steinbeck crafted with precision decades ago, thus directly interfering with the essence of the story.

Not unlike the majority of films, it sacrifices sentiment for action, relationships for drama and distinction of characters for actors. The film itself is not bad, it brings well loved characters and their story to life on the screen, allowing audience to experience their emotions with them. However, <https://assignbuster.com/of-mice-and-men-film-or-novel/>

a question about the true responsibility of directors is brought up; whether it is to accurately tell the tale or to improve it for aesthetic and theatrical purposes.