

Of mice and men – the importance of settings

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



The first two settings that Steinbeck exposes to his readers in *Of Mice and Men* are the countryside and the bunkhouse at the ranch. Both of these are quite crucial to the development of the characters, as well as the progress and proper story-telling in the novel. Steinbeck starts his novella in the countryside, which is described as a very peaceful and calm place, with a few leaves rustling in the air; before the quiet is broken by the two main characters. As the protagonists George and Lennie make their way from the path to the clearing by the river bank, the purpose of the setting becomes evident to the reader. Later, however, the presence of the bunkhouse strategically shifts the entire narrative to a very different set of themes.

The clearing is a place full of life; there is an abundance of green plants, and the presence of animals and insects is also felt. The warm and clean water provides George and Lennie with the soothing bounty of nature; just as the riverbank, with its overshadowing branches and calm atmosphere, provides the two with relief and protection from the relentless sun they endured throughout their long walk. Just as the riverbank gives them literal protection in their journey, it also gives them a metaphorical form of sanctuary. George feels that this place is safe, and lets down his guard. His ominous advice to Lennie to return to the riverbank in case of danger, shows that this small clearing is not just a safe haven for the men, but indeed the only one they have known.

Steinbeck uses the countryside as a tool to tell his story - this is the place where George and Lennie talk about their dreams. After an exhausting day, George is perhaps lulled into a sense of security by the serenity of the surrounding place, and so starts talking about the dream that they have, and

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which they hope will someday come true. George's talk of rabbits and farms, and Lennie's reactions to his words are both key aspects of the book; as they signify man's dreams and his yearning for things which may seem impossible; and the setting used by Steinbeck is instrumental to the development of these themes. But Steinbeck's description also has undertones which could be seen as warning signals. The path that George and Lennie follow to the clearing is a worn out one, as is the tree trunk; both of which have been used a countless number of times before George and Lennie. Perhaps Steinbeck meant this to show that what George and Lennie consider unique to themselves - their dream and their sanctuary - are both things which other people have gone through as well. This could signify that George and Lennie might have the same disappointing fate as the "boys and tramps" who have been on the same path, with similar dreams of a paradise on Earth. This setting is also of great importance due to the climax of the novel taking place here. Being the birth place of the hopes and dreams of George and Lennie, it is only fitting that the riverbank is also the place where George has to take the life of Lennie in the end, symbolizing the death of all the dreams and hopes that the protagonists once had.

Steinbeck starts the second chapter of his novella with a description of another setting - the bunkhouse. This is the place where the ranch workers live and spend their time when they are not out working. From the very first descriptive line of the chapter, the "long rectangular" bunkhouse is shown as a very mundane and featureless place. The entire description of the bunkhouse is rather like a prison - devoid of character - and the layout of the place gives the reader a glimpse of the lifestyle of the ranch workers. The

similar eight bunk beds that line the wall, the unpainted floor, and the white-washed walls all give a very monotonous image. Perhaps Steinbeck also meant this to mirror the monotonous and unappealing life that the ranch workers lead. The “apple boxes” that are “nailed” near the bunks and which are full of various things also give testimony to the lifestyle of the men who live there: The fact that they are just nailed on gives an impression of a carelessly done job; whereas the odd things that are crammed into them show that the men have made a futile attempt to personalize their box – there are personal belongings such as combs, medicine, and even magazines, which are shown as a form of escapism for the ranch men, emphasizing the burden of their lives.

The three small windows, which only give faint beams of sunlight which illuminate dust particles all around are also symbolic of the life in the bunkhouse. The rays of sun could be a metaphor for the brief and faint hopes and dreams that the men have, but even that faint hope is being tainted by the atmosphere of the bunkhouse, much like the beauty of the sunlight being marred by the dust which is everywhere. The bunkhouse, on the whole is shown as an area for men only; it is a place where the ranch workers live and sleep, and entertain themselves. Curley’s wife, for example, is shown to not be welcome in the bunkhouse; neither is Crooks. Both of these people do not come into the category of able-bodied men that the ranch hands embody, and so are not allowed inside.

A comparison of these two main settings yields quite an impressive insight into the amount of work done by Steinbeck to make sure that each setting

plays its designated role to move the plot forward the bunkhouse, though it should be the place where the men can rest after a long day's hard work, is instead the site of growing mistrust, arguments, fights, and negative emotions. Comparing this man-made "shelter" with our first setting, the small clearing near the riverbank, shows what message Steinbeck was trying to prove - there can be no peace where there is man; only nature provides true sanctuary. The dreams that the countryside gave reality to were shattered to pieces due to the interference of man.