

A different form of tragedy: critical analysis of mice and men

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Thomas Scarseth, the author of the examination *A Teachable Good Book: Of Mice and Men*, is correct in saying that Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a tragedy. Yet it is not a tragedy in the classic Aristotelian or Shakespearean sense, which Scarseth states. The majority of the characters in the novel are in stasis.

The world is limited around them and results in minimal possibilities, and the lack of love and friendship both contribute to them being stuck. J. A. Cuddon, the late English teacher and author, defined tragedy in saying, the overwhelming part about tragedy is the element of hopelessness, of inevitability...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 in *Of Mice and Men* are inevitably lead to disappointment, for many reasons, including their social status, job, and even the time period, which plays a part in their struggles. A release from this struggle is hopeless. The tragedy that the characters are a part of results in them being one archetype of being in stasis, and this is due to the constraints the characters have and the lack of love and friendship around them.

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 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 that his wife is ...a sex object, a status symbol (Scarseth), but he is lost. His aggressiveness and his unforgiving attitude on life and people around him 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 struggle, 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. His disability 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 (Steinbeck 33); his opinions were law (Steinbeck 45). Everyone respects Slim and considers him the highest in ranking. But why isn't he the boss? Slim is exploited like the rest of the workers. 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. Holding positions of power don't always equate to being unlimited. Slim is stuck in his routine; he earns his money, then at the end of the month blows it all, and starts the cycle over again. Scarseth puts Slim's troubles into words perfectly: The man who could lead well does not have the position; the one who has the

position and authority is not the leader (Scarseth). The tragedy in the novel is due to the characters inability to improve or succeed because of their limitations, which brings them into the positions they are stuck in.

In addition to the limits of the characters, 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 expressions of love in the novel, so this cannot be true. George and Lennie have the only friendly relationship in the novel, but the love isn't completely mutual or true. 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 Lennie names. Scarseth also mentions that George and Lennie as friends share a good dream (Scarseth). However, this goal isn't good, nor attainable. If their relationship isn't a two-sided one, this dream could never come true or be possible in their limited world, and George comes to learn this. George, because of the his burden of Lennie, his job, and lack of friendship and support that he has, is destined to become just like Slim. He will earn his pay, then he will blow it at the end of the month, like he does when the workers go to the whorehouse at the end of the week. He is going to be stuck, and Lennie puts him in that position. 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 connection between them is when the men go to the whorehouse and play

cards, but there still is no friendship present. Love is also missing between Curley and his wife. They demonstrate 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). With no one to turn to and confide in, the characters are limited in themselves because of this lack of love, and this limits their development.

Finally, Scarseth observes that Steinbeck creates simple yet significant (Scarseth) characters that are archetypes. The fact that they are an archetype is true, yet Scarseth fails to discuss that the characters are all very similar, and in fact, they share a single archetype. He first mentions Candy, the old, one-armed worker with no place to go, as useless as his toothless dog; there is Carlson, gruffly and deliberately unfeeling...and there is Crooks, the dignified proud and aloof but...victim of racial discrimination. There is Slim, calm, reasonable...the real leader...And there is Curley, the arrogant but inept Boss son (Scarseth). These characters represent common social issues and topics that the reader can connect with in their life, which is what archetypes are. These problems, such as racial discrimination and loneliness can be found anywhere. Scarseth, however, does not connect the archetypal characters to the other themes he presents, nor does he address the fact that they are all similar, due to those themes. These archetypes are all constrained, as mentioned earlier, for many different reasons. ADD QUOTE FROM STEINBECK! The characters are one archetype, one kind of person despite their differences: they are tragic people who cannot change.

Yes, the characters have their own conflicts and personal struggles, but they are the same. Their restrictions and the scarcity of love around them causes their shared tragic fate, and this results in the characters sharing a single archetype.

The fact that the book is a tragedy, yet not in the classic sense, is a direct result of characters representing one archetype; people being in stasis. This is due to the limitations the characters have and the lack of love and friendship. Time and time again the characters fall into despair. 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. The greatest tragedy is when people who are not great become consumed by their struggles. 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. They become in stasis. Anyone, even the lower classes or people of society can experience tragedy. In *Of Mice and Men*, it is due to their limitations and the world's limitations and the reality that there is no love and friendship. This is shown with the archetype that the characters represent. 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 jus in their head (Steinbeck 74).

Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New York, N. Y., U. S. A.: Penguin Books, 2000.

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