

Violence and sadism in john steinbeck's of mice and men

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



In John Steinbeck's powerful American masterpiece *Of Mice and Men*, first published in 1937 during the height of the Great Depression, the main characters of George Milton and Lennie Small experience many hard and difficult situations which on occasion are steeped with violence and sadistic behavior, due to living and working in "a world where personal interaction is marked by. . . petty control, misunderstanding, jealousy and callousness" (Scheer 14). Yet after a careful reading of the text, it becomes clear that George and Lennie are at times the true instigators of the violence while also being pawns in the hands of such men as Curley, the prizefighter who finds much sadistic delight in picking on the ranch workers and those whom he sees as socially beneath him. Interestingly, Steinbeck himself was quite familiar with the trials and tribulations associated with being an outsider and a common laborer, much like George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. During his youth, Steinbeck worked diligently as a hired hand on ranches close to his home in Salinas, California, where he met and talked with migrant farm workers who told him of their adventures and mishaps before and during the Great Depression when millions of people were unemployed and were forced to earn their living by any means necessary. These chance meetings and descriptions of what it was like to be a common laborer served Steinbeck well, for he later incorporated many of these down-and-out tales into his novels and short stories, *Of Mice and Men* being no exception. If we examine some of the major scenes in *Of Mice and Men*, the presence of violence and sadism can easily be sensed, especially through the actions and reactions of Lennie Small, the lumbering giant with the mind of a child who brings a frightening capacity for violence into the unsuspecting bunkhouse at the

ranch. As William Goldhurst points out, Lennie “ carries with him, intact from childhood, that low threshold between rage and pleasure which we all carry within us into adulthood” (135), yet in the hands of those most prone to sadistic behavior, Lennie is a scapegoat and thus cannot be held accountable for his actions, due to his mental capacity which borders on imbecility. In the scene where George and Lennie are on their way to the ranch to buck barley, the conversation turns to their last job in the little town of Weed, where Lennie had been attracted to a girl’s red dress. After grabbing at her clothes, Lennie became so frightened by her screaming that George was forced to hit him over the head to make him let go of her. Following this incident, the duo ends up being chased by a mob out to lynch them for Lennie’s treatment of the girl which in the eyes of the lynch mob was akin to attempted rape. In essence, this scene illustrates Steinbeck’s power as a writer with his ability to bring into extraordinary scenes of social conflict the psychological forcefulness of Lennie’s infantile reactions to the girl’s red dress. But the violence of Lennie towards the girl pales in comparison to the violent reactions of the mob who are obviously either unaware of Lennie’s child-like mind or simply see the situation as an opportunity to express their inner anger towards “ a subhuman creature, unable to distinguish between right and wrong” (Benson 256). The initial introduction of Curley, the swaggering, boastful son of the ranch owner, truly sets the stage for more violence and sadistic behavior aimed at not only George and Lennie but anyone who stands in his way or throws a glancing eye towards his attractive yet whorish wife. During the time when George and Lennie are waiting for the lunch bell, Curley enters the bunkhouse, ostensibly looking for his father but really just

to examine the new hired men. After putting across to the men that he is the master of the ranch, Curley leaves and Candy, the swamper who sweeps out the bunkhouse, warns George and Lennie about Curley's temper and his eagerness to fight anyone who usurps his authority. But in this instance, George could be viewed as the instigator to the violence that follows, for he calls Curley's wife "a rat-trap, a bitch, and a piece of jail-bait" (Goldhurst 130), and later fully expresses his disgust at Curley's glove full of vaseline, aimed at softening his hand when he strokes his wife's genitalia. But again, Curley could have simply laughed at George and shrugged it off instead of using this episode as a springboard for more violence and sadism.

Incidentally, when the other men in the bunkhouse taunt Curley about his wife's wantonness and he spies Lennie grinning about it, Curley attacks Lennie who at first does nothing to defend himself because of George's warning about his strength. But then, due to his imbecility, Lennie grabs Curley's hand, the one with the vaseline glove, and squeezes it, thereby crushing every bone. But the most important scene in *Of Mice and Men* concerns the killing of Curley's wife in the barn by Lennie. As the other workmen and George are pitching horseshoes outside the barn, Lennie suddenly realizes that his puppy, given to him by Slim, the jerkline skinner, is dead as a result of his seemingly gentle and innocent caresses. As he sits down in the straw and bemoans the puppy's fate, Curley's wife quickly appears from around the corner of the stalls. Her flirtatious behavior at first does not affect Lennie and he doesn't say one word to her, fearing that he would not get to feed the rabbits which George promised to him upon obtaining their own ranch. But Curley's wife gradually manages to draw

Lennie's attention away from the dead puppy and initiates a rather curious incident—she convinces him to stroke her hair which he does as if she was just another plaything like his dead puppy. As Lennie continues to stroke the girl's hair, she suddenly tries to pull away which infuriates Lennie, especially when she starts to scream. And just like the puppy, Lennie becomes a little too rough and breaks her neck without any awareness that she provoked her own death, due to not knowing that Lennie is nothing but a lumbering idiot with the strength of a plow horse. According to Jackson J. Benson, this scene from *Of Mice and Men* contains images of great power and violence, for it makes “murder seem as natural and innocent as puppy love” (179). As a very sizable child, Lennie amplifies the entire situation, for after killing Curley's wife, he flees to the grove near the Salinas River just as George had told him in case of any “accidents” on Lennie's part. But this time around, George appears to be the sadist, for Lennie begins to think about living in a cave if George decides he doesn't want him around anymore. The final scene in *Of Mice and Men* brings the plot full circle, for Lennie's contradictory values are then affirmed—his blameless, animal instincts mixed with sad humanity, his innocent longings for a pen full of rabbits which he can pet and tend to, and his grim awareness that his life may be nearing its end. When Candy, the bunkhouse sweeper, finds Curley's wife half-buried and stone dead in the hay in the barn, he calls for George who gets a gun while Candy spreads the alarm that the girl has been murdered. But when Curley is told of his wife's death, his sadistic tendencies come to a boil, for he realizes that Lennie is to blame which sets into motion a true cycle of vengeance on the part of Curley and the other hired hands at the ranch. With a loaded shotgun

in hand, Curley and the other men start out in search of Lennie, the poor, dumb brute with a tendency for childish violence. But it is George who finds Lennie hiding in the bushes near the Salinas River, and soon makes up his mind to put an end to Lennie's life, to punish him once more for "being a bad boy." But for Lennie, badness is just a matter of opinion and taboos based on the mind of an imbecile, not consequences and responsibilities, for he does not care about nor understand the death of Curley's wife who exists for him only as another lifeless puppy or a mouse dead from too much hard handling. In the conclusion of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, George puts the muzzle of his gun to the back of Lennie's head and pulls the trigger, an action which fully supports and reinforces the violence in the novel. In essence, all of the characters in *Of Mice and Men* seem to have been reared in violence; some are violent by nature, while others simply accept violent, sadistic behavior as part of the "normal" life of a drifter or a migrant farm worker. As Frank N. Magill so acutely observes, "both George and Lennie are friendless and alone and prone to destructive violence. Both are adolescents caught in a world of chaos and rage" (2145), exactly as John Steinbeck intended it. In his words, these characters exist in "sweet violence" which moves the reader to contemplate their puzzling fates.

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