

John Steinbeck's use of realism, characterization assignment

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Steinbeck used realism to convey his points for a purpose, and his main purpose was that he wanted something to be made known to the public. Of *Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* both tell of the hardships people went through and also the harsh conditions of their situations. The characters in both of these novels play an important role in personalizing the occurring events for the reader, making the novel more effective in getting the writers' messages across to the audience. Steinbeck's use of the American Dream and the will for the characters to succeed is also evident throughout the two novels.

These dreams help the reader to relate to the characters, therefore making a bigger impact on those who read the novel. John Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath", tells of a very harsh journey to California that the Joads, like many other barnacles in the same Depression era, embarked upon in order to find work and escape their dying farms in Oklahoma. During the depression a severe drought covered the plains, called the Dust Bowl. This natural disaster destroyed any chance that the farmers had of making a living, and they were forced to travel west and leave their homes in hopes of finding a job.

Part of the novel's sense of realism comes from the setting. The Joads head to California from Oklahoma and their journey is characterized by poverty, starvation, death, and suffering (Sterner 405). Steinbeck not only utilizes the setting as a sense of realism but also uses vivid description and specific details to draw attention to the numerous hardships encountered by the families forced to travel west in search of opportunity (Jackson 316). The first

evening after the Goads leave their home, they stop on the side of the road to help another family.

This family is very thankful for the Goads' help, and offers their tent for the loads' sickly grandfather, but unfortunately Grandpa passes away that night. The family is troubled from the very start of their journey and Steinbeck creates feelings of sympathy toward the Goads as well as the other families in the same situation. As the novel progresses, the family's disparity becomes more and more evident. Grandma Goad dies shortly after Grandpa does and since the Goads are indigent and can barely meet ends to survive, they are forced to beg for money to and Lewis).

As they continue to travel the Goads encounter many more obstacles, but here is one incident as the novel comes to a close. Rose of Sharon, the oldest daughter, goes into labor and her baby is stillborn. Rose of Sharon notices a dying old man who is malnourished and offers him her breast milk so that he might be able to survive. As the novel closes, the reader is left with despair and a sense of loneliness. Steinbeck's use of realism makes a strong impact on the reader, which makes this one of the greatest American novels ever written (Jackson 316). *Of Mice and Men* was also written during the time of the 1930s, the depression era.

This novel is a short story of two men: a small, short, and smart guy named George and a big, tall, mentally retarded man named Lennie. The novel is based around these two main characters and their journey to fulfill their dream to find true happiness on a farm that they can one day call their own (Hearse). In "*Of Mice and Men*" the use of realism is not only seen through <https://assignbuster.com/john-steinbecks-use-of-realism-characterization-assignment/>

the depressing life of George and Lennie, but it also shows the life that Crooks, a black stable hand on the farm, had. The character of Crooks is used to symbolize the social standing of the black community occurring during the time at which the novel is set.

Crooks is a lonely African American on the farm that feels out of place. As George and Lennie explain their dream to Crooks he brushes them off and says that no one around here can implement their dreams. This realism gives the reader an impression that Crooks has absolutely no hope.

However, Crooks may be pessimistic, but yet even he has a dream, which is the hope of one day experiencing the joys of his childhood again. Crooks' character is portrayed as very lonely in the novel, this is evident when Crooks explains, " A guy needs someone. " (Mice 77). Crooks is telling the reader the need of human interaction.

This realism that Steinbeck uses shows the reader the harsh realities of the black community during the time of the depression in the novel. Steinbeck not only uses realism to make an impact on his readers but he also uses strong characterization to his advantage as well (Howard). By using characters such as Ma Joad and Curley's wife, he is able to personalize the novel for the reader. This technique that Steinbeck uses makes the reader feel like he/she can relate with the characters' struggles, therefore, creating a greater sense of understanding toward the characters' situations (Horn).

These two characters can best be described as strong, courageous, and they show great amounts of integrity as well as faith. In order to write a great book that will make an impact on the reader, the author must not only use

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realism but also have a strong sense of characterization for the reader to relate to. Steinbeck successfully achieved both of these aspects of a great novel. John Steinbeck character, Ma Joad in "The Grapes of Wrath", is the epitome of a strong character. She is a supportive, loving woman, and surprisingly the family's center of strength (Britches and Lewis).

She is intent on keeping the family whole and together. The family looks to Ma Joad for their source of hope and encouragement. She is the emotional and physical backbone of the family, and it is very important to Grandpa when he began to cry. His chin wavered and his old lips tightened over his mouth and he sobbed hoarsely. Ma rushed over to him and put her arms around him. She lifted him to his feet, her broad back straining, and she half lifted, half helped him to the tent" (Wrath 185). Steinbeck makes it clear to the reader in this passage that Ma is the first to step up in times of need, and she puts others before herself no matter what. Under the spread of the tarpaulin Grandma lay on a mattress, and Ma sat beside her. The air was stifling hot, and the flies buzzed in the shade of the canvas. Grandma was naked under a long piece of pink curtain. She turned her old head restlessly from side to side, and she muttered and choked. Ma sat on the ground beside her, and with a piece of cardboard drove the flies away and fanned a stream of moving hot air over the tight old face. Rose of Sharon sat on the other side and watched her mother" (Wrath 285).

The reader notices several times throughout the novel that Ma will care for anyone in need no matter what the circumstance. "In show of her fundamental spirit she accepts Casey into the family because the Joads just

do not refuse food and shelter or lift on the road to anybody that ask[s]" (Britches and Lewis). She takes it upon herself to look out for to avoid any discouragement to the other family. Grandma dies in the back of the wagon with Ma by her side, but trying to avoid any discouragement to the other family members, Ma does not share the news until they have reached their stopping point.

The strength that Ma shows in this situation is far greater than any exhibited by the other family members. " Her capacity to care marks the measure of her self-respect. " As the action progresses her caring does not change in kind but rather grows in breadth and intensity" (Britches and Lewis). By creating such a noble character, Steinbeck greatly influences his readers, and his efforts in sharing the hardships these families in the past went through are successful. The character of Curly's wife is a very vivid and unique one. She represented the way that women were viewed by society as a whole.

Steinbeck portrayed Curly's wife as a temptress, when actually the woman is just craving for attention. Steinbeck made Curly's wife stand out by the fact that she was the only woman on the ranch, she was the only one who dressed to impress, and the only person without a full name (Testing).

Steinbeck often used very colorful statements like " She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. She wore a cotton dress and red mules, and the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers" (Mice 1).

These vivid and wild descriptions that Steinbeck created for Curler's wife is just one of the many characters that Steinbeck created, in order for the reader to feel or relate to what the character is going through. In Curler's wife's case she is an attention deprived woman that is just one of the many lonely people on the ranch. "Of Mice and Men" and "The Grapes of Wrath" both examine the morality and necessary actions the characters choose as they pursue their dreams. Steinbeck uses the concept that dreams are better than reality, but that the dream is really hard to grasp.

This concept is also used by three other famous authors who are Crane, dream is the faith held by many Americans, that through hard work, courage, and determination one can achieve financial prosperity and also some believe that it is led to an emphasis of material wealth as a measure of success and/or happiness. Like many people today the characters George, Leonie, Candy, Curler's wife, and the Goads all wanted the American dream. Most of their dreams of success, wealth and prosperity were depleted by the harsh realities of life. Most of the characters in the novel *Of Mice and Men* have a dream of meeting.

George and Leonie are best friends that go everywhere together. Their dream is to someday own a farm of their own and have rabbits to tend to. The dream to Leonie is an antidote to disappointment and loneliness, and he often asks George to recite the description of the farm to him. This dream is ultimately lost when Leonie kills Curler's wife and George kills Leonie towards the end of the novel. This dream was later shared by two other friends on the farm, Candy and Crooks. As the reader can see these dreams

are one way that the characters can cover up the loneliness and hopelessness of their existence.

One other character in the novel that had a dream is Curley's wife. Curley's wife's dream is her fantasies in becoming a part in movies and having a life of luxury. This dream is shattered and never fulfilled, because of the dissatisfaction of her life and when she is accidentally killed by Leonie. As the reader can see the dreamers in the novel are undermined by the hard facts of reality (Astor 43). In the 1930s the country suffered ecological devastation called the depression. During this economy downfall the mid-west prairie state families suffer from a large drought that leaves them with nothing to survive.

This terrible phenomenon is called the Dust Bowl. In an attempt to escape this unforgettable time, a family called the Joads dream of wealth and success in the great state of California. In order to pursue their dream they have to leave their belongings behind. This journey carries death and suffering with it when Grandma and Grandpa Joad die and many of the family members leave the family. The family left Oklahoma in order to find jobs in California (Hearse). The Joads' dream, which is well known as the American dream, is shattered by certain events and conditions that the Joads faced.

In conclusion, John Steinbeck's style of writing impacted society just as he had hoped. He wrote about real life experiences and hardships to show the reader what people went through, like the Joads and the many characters in "Of Mice and Men". Steinbeck informed the reader of what families had to overcome, which ultimately impacted whoever read his novels. The use of

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realism, characterization, and dreams in his two novels made them the greatest American novels in history. Works Cited Astor, Richard Dictionary of Literary Biography, volume 9: Saint Bonaventure University.