

## The Collapse of the American Dream during the Great Depression in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the disillusionment of the American minorities in their pursuit of the American Dream in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* during the Great Depression. Among these minorities, one mentions migrant workers, blacks, women, disabled, and old people. The latter are prevented from achieving their dreams during the Great Depression in the sense that they are always victim of discrimination and other social injustices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The American Dream can be defined as an ideology according to which life should be better and happier for everybody in the United States. This ideology is a set of values traced in the discourse stating that "*all people are created equal by their creator, that they are endowed with certain alienable rights among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,*" <sup>(1)</sup> as mentioned in "The Declaration of Independence of 1776". Unfortunately, this collective Dream is viewed as unachievable during the Great Depression, which is, in effect, the moment when the so-called Dream becomes an illusion for the migrants, blacks, women, disabled and old people analyzed through John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

The purpose of this article is to show the collapse of the American Dream for the American minorities who are prevented from achieving the dream of better life in the time of economic crisis in *Of Mice and Men*.

The central question in this article is the following: to what extent is the American Dream considered as a failure for the minorities? We answer this question by concentrating on the injustices faced by these minorities in their pursuit of better and equitable life. This article is divided into four sections. In the first section, we demonstrate that poverty, unemployment

and social prejudices represent the main obstacles which prevent migrant workers from achieving the American Dream.

In the second section, we show how African Americans are discriminated in American society. It shows how the notion of equality and freedom is no longer associated with the American democratic ideals.

In the third section, we scrutinize the reconstruction of social injustices against women in their pursuit of happiness. It also shows how women are treated as men's properties.

In the last section, we show how disabled and old people are mistreated in the time of crisis and prevented from enjoying the full fruition of life, values and equality which are the basic tenets of the American Dream.

### 1.1 Obstacles in the fulfillment of migrant workers' dreams

During the Great Depression, millions of people migrated to California in the search of better life and good paying jobs. Unfortunately, they were disillusioned, because many of them faced unemployment and found only low paying jobs which maintained them in extreme poverty. John Steinbeck, who captured that hard time, wrote *Of Mice and Men*, a novel that tells the story of two migrants, George Milton and Lennie Small as

childhood friends and itinerant workers, that is to say, dependent on seasonal jobs. They are homeless and travel from towns to towns in search of a job. While they are on their way to find a job on a ranch in Salinas Valley, in California, they camp at the Salinas River where they share a dream that, one day, they will buy their own farm and house, become their own bosses and live off the fat of the land. As George is like the spokesman of their dream, Lennie begs him to talk about it once more before sleeping:

*O.k. Someday- we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and- (p.14).*

While George is speaking, Lennie interrupts him and adds: “An' live off the fatta the lan.” (p.14). To make it clear, their dream is all about happiness and comfort properties because to “live off the fatta the land” stands for leading an easy life without any effort and eating from farm activities. But, the only issue they come across with is the economic crisis which affects all the sphere of activities in American society. This actual fact hampers George and Lennie who embody the migrants’ community to achieve their dreams. Obviously, poverty and unemployment are the greatest obstacles for migrants in the pursuit of the American Dream. During the Great Depression, that extreme poverty reduced people to animals. George and Lennie, in the novel, are compared to animals such as a bear and horse that the author describes as follows:

*He walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws [...] and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse (p.2).*

Perhaps, Steinbeck’s perception about poor people at that time was similar to animals that he brought the human and animal’s worlds closer altogether. This is evident with the title of the book, *Of Mice and Men*, which is inspired from the sentence of Robert Burn’s poem *To Mouse*: “The best laid scheme o’ mice n’ men aft agley.”

In fact, when George and Lennie’s nature is described as closer to that of mice, this shows their impossibility to achieve their dream of better life, because, the image of the mouse symbolizes extreme poverty in society. Migrants and poor people, to whom this image is attributed, find through it a form

of rejection which also shows their nothingness in American society.

George and Lennie are also victim of the world cruelty and social injustices of all kinds that thwart them from fulfilling the American Dream during the Depression. One of the causes of such a jeopardy is the lack of education and physical appearance. This is evidenced through George who regrets of not having a good education that would enable him to save his wage and buy his own ranch:

*An' I ain't so bright neither, or I wouldn't be buckin' barley for my fifty and found. If I was bright, if I was even a little bit smart, I'd have my own little place, an' I'd be bringin' in my own crops, 'stead of doin' all the work and not getting what comes up out the ground (p.40).*

What the novelist demonstrates here is the migrant farmworkers’ lack of qualities required to be accepted as respectable people in the United States. The narrator in this passage admits this insufficiency when he evokes the notion of elegance through the sentence “if I was even a little bit smart, I'd have my own little place”, which means that to be smart, means to be an accepted and respected personality in the well-off’s world. The other quality is that of the lack of education which is portrayed by their daily use of slang language with full of vulgar expressions in the book such as “poor baster”, “the son-of-a-bitch”, “a tart” and “the jack.” Undeniably, education plays a fundamental role in human life to succeed, for it is one of the key factors of success not only in American society, but in every human society. “An' I ain't so bright neither” really shows George’s lack of education in a society that needs people full of much knowledge and able to fulfill their destiny.

Another type of social injustice that George and Lennie are victim of, is violence. John Steinbeck portrays the ranch as a society of violence in which minorities are not allowed to achieve their dreams. In the book, when Curley, the boss’ son, meets George and Lennie, for the first time, he becomes too angry as he hates big men and visibly Lennie turns into his enemy. Steinbeck describes his attitude in these words:

*His eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and*

*pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously (p.25).*

The sentence “his hands closed into fists” shows that Curley embodies the American mischievous behavior of anti-migration policy stated by some American leaders who do not admit anybody to go to the United States to search better life. The latter think that the United States must not be a destination of anybody from all over the world. For example President Donald Trump states a policy of “zero tolerance” which aims at prosecuting immigrants in justice if they cross over the American borders illegally. <sup>(3)</sup> If Steinbeck calls George and Lennie “the new men”, it is because he presents them as foreigners. So, Curley’s hostile attitude towards them shows their rejection on the ranch. Even though today this hostile attitude towards foreigners has slightly changed in America, but the issues of immigrants is still controversial. As for African Americans, the latter are also prevented from reaching the American Dream of equality and freedom that we scrutinize in the section below.

## **1.2 Discrimination against a black character**

The struggle for equality and freedom has ever been blacks’ Dream in American society. It is in this context that Jim Cullen, in his book, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, argues:

*The most famous figure in this struggle for equality was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. [...] He had a dream, you see. A dream that scares us, a dream that we often try to ignore. But it’s one we can’t forget, either, and don’t entirely want to. That’s because in our better moments, it’s our dream, too. (Cullen: 2003,110)*

But, this blacks’ Dream for equality was viewed as a nightmare during the Great Depression. In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck represents the character Crooks, the only black on the ranch, as the embodiment of the whole black community discriminated and victimized by white racists in the Great Depression era. His separation from the rest of the farm workers because of the color of his skin shows not only his rejection, but that of all African Americans on the American soil. He is for example given a room in the barn that he shares with animals, whereas the other workers live in the bunkhouse. The contrast between Crooks’ living conditions and those

of his counterparts describe, in effect, blacks’ inferior status in the white man’s world. When he for example says that “*I ain’t wanted in the bunkhouse, and you ain’t wanted in my room [...] ‘Cause I am black,*” (p.68) he recalls how blacks are looked down upon by their white neighbors. For, the sentence “you ain’t wanted in my room [...] ‘Cause I am black.” attests of blacks’ inferiority in a world ruled by whites. One discovers here that this character is rejected not because he behaves badly or is less educated, but because he is black. This means that the black color is the only cause of mistreatment of African Americans in the United States. Steinbeck contextualizes this fact during the Depression, the moment when black and white people could not travel together, pray together, and study together. For, whites believed that blacks were inferior, evil creatures or beasts which could not enjoy the same rights and opportunities with white Americans. That is why Crooks is forced to stay in the same building with animals, simply because white people think he stinks as bad as an animal. That wrong view of white counterparts pushes him to complain as follows: “*They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m black. They say I stink*” (p.68). This shows that, not only Crooks is considered a subman because of the color of his skin, but he is also viewed as an animal. This image of Crooks with an inferior status illustrates the way the whole black community is seen in the United States. The author has created this character to show how blacks are terrorized and subjected to all forms of injustices in a country which they think, is also theirs, because built with the sweat and blood of their ancestors.

Although Crooks is an educated and full time worker on the ranch, his status remains the lowest on the ranch because of his skin color. He has no power over any white man and white women. When Curley’s wife is looking for her husband in Crooks’ room, she finds only Crooks, Lennie and Candy, and finally concludes: “*I know all of the men have gone downtown and they have left the weak ones*” (p.77). These Curley’s wife’s offensive words show that Crooks, Lennie and Candy represent the three different oppressed social layers in American society during the Depression: black people, mental disabled and old people.

Furthermore, when Crooks dares to dismiss Curley’s wife out of his room because of her prejudice, she threatens him and promises to lynch him:

*Listen, Nigger, [...] You know what I can do to you if you open your trap? [...] Well, you*

*keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny* (p.79).

These Curley's wife's offensive words show that during the Depression, racial discrimination grew more and more unbearable and African Americans' situation worsened. They were indeed, on the one hand subjected to Ku Klux Klan's lynching and on the other hand, prevented from the alienable rights. Benjamin Evayoulou, in his article "The Autobiography of Malcolm X", reports a testimony of Malcolm X's experience of racial victimization: "My father was finally himself to die by the white man's hands. It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence" (Malcolm X quoted in Evayoulou: 2009, 86).

Facing such oppression, Crooks reduces himself to nothingness. He loses his personality and becomes a "yes, ma'am" as his only answer he gives to Curley's wife after the latter reminds him of his place in society. According to white people the skin color is the barrier which makes them exceptional creatures from African Americans. This wrong view over him pushes him to lose his interest to pursue the American Dream. Then, when Lennie and Candy tell him that they have a dream to buy a farm of their own and live off the fat of the land, Crooks sees it as an illusion that has never been realized. He compares this illusion to that of Christians for a promised paradise in heaven when he, for example, argues:

*I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven* (p.74).

When the narrator says that Crooks has seen hundreds of people coming with their land in their heads, he wants to show here the unachieved dream of everybody to own a land and become rich. We say unachieved because for this character, the dream has just stopped in their mind. Then the Depression has been for the author a very important moment to show not only the sad atmosphere which has prevailed at that moment, but also the failure of the American Dream; a collective dream that would normally allow everybody to enjoy life and the pursuit of happiness. The comparison of the dream of a land and heaven Crooks makes in this passage shows the impossibility for all Americans to achieve theirs. For, he believes

that the American Dream is just a propaganda of white people to hide their hypocrisy, because the notions of equality, freedom and happiness for all American citizens have never been achieved for black people, women, disabled and migrants. That is why Malcolm X, in his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" delivered at King Solomon Baptist Church, in 1964, Detroit, argued that, in the United States, he saw only the nightmare but not the American Dream:

*I am speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream. I see an American nightmare* (Malcolm quoted in Ellis and Smith: 140, 2010).

The victimization that Malcolm X is talking about here does not exclude women who are traditionally described as second zone citizens, a status that many societies in the world think, was attributed to them by God himself. This question of women is examined in the section below.

### 1.3 The reconstruction of violence against Curley's wife

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."<sup>(4)</sup>

In the United States, women were victim of several forms of violence based on gender discrimination. The restriction of their voting right and their rejection from college which men thought to be their only privilege, attest of this gender discrimination. In the novel, John Steinbeck portrays Curley's wife as the symbol of women victimization during the Great Depression. This character is the only woman on the ranch who has experienced a two week-unhappy marriage. For, she is victim of domestic violence, treated as a sexual instrument, and strictly forbidden to talk to anyone else but to Curley only, her husband. This man is a jealous and aggressive husband who forces his wife to stay all time at home without having a talk with other men of the ranch. Unhappy, his wife feels alone and abandoned, then complains about her major rights violated by her husband:

*Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely [...] You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad* (p.87).

This means Curley's wife is prevented from the freedom of speech. She is completely silenced by her husband who considers her as his property. To make it clearer, Steinbeck wants to demonstrate that not only Curley's wife is totally subjugated by her husband, but she is also an unworthy woman, a mere property of the latter. Steinbeck does not give her a proper identity when he just names her "Curley's wife" which can be understood as Curley's property. As a matter of facts, the absence of equality between men and women in the United States had been one of the snags that prevented women from achieving the American Dream.

In addition, Curley's wife is not allowed to work or exert any professional career in society, because for her husband, her place is at home where she has to perform all the housework.

Her dream to become a Hollywood actress has faded away after her marriage with Curley. The wrong behavior of her husband is certainly what pushes her to hate him, as she argues:

*I don' like Curley. He ain't a nice fella [...] Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes- all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me (p.89).*

One discovers here Curley's wife disillusionment of marriage with the son of the boss she hoped, would treat her like a human being. Unfortunately, she is sexually harassed and finds herself a slave in her own house. This is clear when Candy tells George that Curley always wears a glove full of vasoline on his left hand to keep it soft for his wife: "Well, I tell ya what—Curley says he's keepin' that hand soft for wife" (p.27). That is to say, Curley lets his left hand soft to show how he is sexually involved with his wife he considers, not as a human being, but as an object of pleasure. These wrong sexual impulses are denounced by George who explains that Curley eats raw eggs and makes a request of patent medicines to increase his sexual capacities for his wife: "Glove fulla vasoline. An'I bet he is eatin' raw eggs and writin' to the patent medicine houses" (p.35). In fact, patent medicines are drugs that strengthen men's sexual performance, but their use is illegal in the United States.

As she is not respected by her own husband, Curley's wife is also victim of public insults by other men on the ranch. She is not respected by the farm workers and is accorded less importance. The men on the

ranch keep distance from her. They offensively call her a "tramp", "bitch" or a "tart" because she makes up heavily to charm them. When George and Lennie arrive on the ranch for the first time, Candy tells them that Curley's wife is a promiscuous wife who attempts to seduce every man: "*I seen her give slim the eye. Curley never seen it. An' I seen her give Carlson the eye*" (p.27). It shows that Curley's wife's dream of becoming a movie star and famous woman is rejected by the society, for at that time the chance to succeed and fulfill the American Dream was limited only to white men. As a result, the American Dream was no longer "*a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest status of their destiny*" as prescribed by James Adams (Adams: 1931, 405). Like women, handicapped and old people were also rejected by American society that we study in the section below.

#### **1.4.Handicapped and old people's victimization**

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck's characters are either physical or mental disabled. Candy, Crooks and Lennie are good illustrations of the two categories of group of people visibly rejected because of their infirmities. Most of these characters living with physical handicap have been injured accidentally during the labor. Indeed, Steinbeck portrays the ranch as a place of enslavement and torture for most of the workers. They perform dirty and tough tasks of labor, sometimes, unrewarded or rewarded, but with an insignificant amount of money. The case of Candy who loses his right hand on the ranch and becomes disabled is a good example. For, one sees how his employer compensates him with only five months of his wage, as he worries to George:

*I ain't much good with on'y one hand. I lost my hand right here on this ranch. That's why they give me a job swampin'. An' they give me two hunderd an' fifty dollars 'cause I los' my hand (p.58).*

This passage is a good illustration of the way handicapped people are viewed in the American society. Described as a land where strong and healthy men are needed for labor, America looks at handicapped as useless people and a burden for the state. The low wage that Candy is paid after his accident is not only a way to show his nothingness, but the nothingness of all handicapped people in the United States. The odd job he is now given after his hand is cut off, is certainly a way to justify the low salary he is paid according to his status. This means that at that time, America was not ready yet to spend

a single coin for a person who did nothing in the society, especially disabled people, for he did not contribute to the development of the country.

Just like the handicapped people, old people experience social injustices as well. In the novel, the author portrays Candy as victim of the American social prejudices. This discrimination against old people reached its highest peak during the Great Depression when old people were taken as a burden or useless in society. Steinbeck depicts Candy, the old man of the ranch, as the victim of age discrimination in workplace, exerted on elderly in the United States, as stated by Amy Elisa Jackson, the American expert in lifestyle journalism that “*age discrimination is alive and well in America. And it’s affecting more than the community of retirees who want to re-enter the workforce*”<sup>(5)</sup>. This character is a homeless and isolated old man in the United States because he has no one to take care of him. His only companion has always been his old dog which, unfortunately, has just been shot dead by Carlson, the other worker of the ranch. This Candy’s dog has been accused of stinking as it became older, blind and lame: “*God awmighty, that dog stinks. Get him outa here, Candy! I don’t know nothing that stinks as bad as an old dog. You gotta get him out*” (p.44). Carlson decides to euthanize it in order to put it out of its misery, as he justifies himself in these terms: “*The way I’d shoot him, he wouldn’t feel nothing. I’d put the gun right there [...] Right back of the head. He wouldn’t even quiver*” (p.45). The statement “he wouldn’t feel nothing” justifies that Carlson’s decision to kill the dog in a painless way is an act of euthanasia, for it is a painless killing.

The way Candy’s dog is killed foreshadows his own fate, for he is old as well. That is to say, Steinbeck wants to alert his readers that Candy will be euthanized like his dog by the ranch men who believe that being handicapped or becoming older is synonym of uselessness in society. This is shown when all of the workers go out to town on Saturday night. They leave only Candy, the old man; Crooks, the stable buck; and Lennie, the mental disabled that Curley’s wife qualifies offensively as the weak and corpses:

*Saturday night. Ever’body out doin’ som’pin’. Ever’body! An’ what am I doin’? Standin’ here talkin’ to a bunch of bindle stiffs- a nigger an’ a dum-dum and a lousy ol’ sheep-an’ likin’ it because they ain’t nobody else* (p.78).

Through this Curley’s wife’s utterances, John Steinbeck shows the way old people and other minorities are treated in the United States. When she wonders “an’ what am I doin’? Standin’ here talkin’ to a bunch of bindle stiffs”, she expresses her resentment of staying with worthless people she thinks, are mere corpses who need no particular attention. Here, she calls Candy “a lousy ol’ sheep” which means an inferior or useless old man. So, this offense against the character Candy is just a hallucination John Steinbeck makes to show the world how old people are unjustly treated during the Great Depression. This social injustice against this category of people had been one of the main causes of the failure of the American Dream.

In short, in *Of Mice and Men*, handicapped and old people are not considered as full citizens, and so, they are victim of social abuses such as enslavement, euthanasia and discrimination which were viewed as the obstacles to the achievement of the American Dream. The life of these characters reflects that of the American minorities during the Great Depression when the United States was no longer connected to the notion of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of better life for all people.

## 2. CONCLUSION

At the end of this article, one discovers that the American Dream was not achievable by all American citizens. For, *Of Mice and Men*, reads that migrants, blacks, disabled and old people including women are the country’s minorities which are denied the right to pursue the American Dream for life, liberty and happiness as stated by the Founding Fathers of the United States.

We have finally demonstrated that poverty, the world cruelty and other social injustices against American minorities prevent the latter from the pursuit of happiness, the enjoyment of freedom, and from the respect of human life and dignity during the Great Depression. In this sense, the collective Dream has collapsed because other American citizens are rejected from the American society of the mainstream.

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