
Steinbeck's Life: How It Influenced *Of Mice And Men*

John Steinbeck was an American author during the 1900's. He grew up in a rural farming community and worked as a manual laborer during the Great Depression. The Great Depression was a time in American history where unemployment and poverty affected everyone. John Steinbeck wrote multiple novels throughout his life, and many are based on his own experiences. *Of Mice and Men* takes place in Northern California during the Great Depression and features two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, who fruitlessly try to find and keep a job despite Lennie's mental challenges. Recognizing the biographical elements in the novel gives the reader a deeper understanding of the characters and events.

John Steinbeck lived through some harsh conditions while he worked as a manual laborer. The poverty and economic downfall in the Great Depression caused John Steinbeck and other manual laborers to endure rough living conditions. Steinbeck says, "And I remember too well the cockroaches under my washbasin and the impossibility of getting a job. I was scared thoroughly. And I can't forget the scare" ("Biography"). The living conditions of the laborers were grim and filthy. Steinbeck finding bugs under the water basin that he was supposed to clean himself with is very unsanitary. Not only were the physical conditions rough, but the mental strain was difficult too. During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce and didn't pay well when found. The mental strain of not having steady job security, and not knowing how one was going to get from one day to the next would have been terrifying. This grim lifestyle is demonstrated in the book when George finds a can and reads its label that, "Says 'positively kills lice, roaches and other scourges,' What the hell kind of bed you giving us, anyways" (Steinbeck 20). Similar to Steinbeck's experience of having an overabundance of bugs, the characters in the novel find bug poison by their beds. Having poison by sleeping arrangements has to violate some type of health code. It is unsanitary and exposure to toxins such as bug poison can harm humans, and contact with some insecticides can even cause death. These rough living conditions of having poison by sleeping arrangements are grim, but Lennie and George accepted them because they had no better option at the time. During Steinbeck's experience as a laborer, "He worked as a caretaker for an estate and later worked at a fish hatchery...working long hours during the freezing winters ("Biography"). Steinbeck, like lots of other manual laborers, had to work at a wide variety of jobs because he accepted any job he could get. With a lowered amount of jobs, people took any work they could get because they feared that they wouldn't be able to find another job. Even when people found and accepted a job, the job itself didn't pay very well even though the work was brutal. Steinbeck's rough working conditions are also fodder for the work found in the book. "What kinda job?' 'We was diggin' a cesspool'" (Steinbeck 25). A cesspool is a deep underground pit that holds human feces. Lennie and George were probably working with dirt all day and constantly had dust in their mouths and lungs because they were digging during a period of drought called the 'Dust Bowl'. Manual labor like digging is also not the easiest work on the planet. They most likely had to work long hours with little breaks and with little pay in the end. In the novel, Lennie and George apply for a ranch job when just before they were digging a cesspool. They traveled all over the country looking for jobs, so throughout their lives they worked in many different working environments just like real life manual laborers. Understanding the working conditions that John Steinbeck had to endure gives the reader a greater understanding of the conditions the characters in the novel experienced.

In 1936, John Steinbeck was asked to investigate migrant worker living conditions. He wrote a series of articles called *The Harvest Gypsies* about his observations. "The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease..." ("Harvest"). The migrant workers were carriers of disease because of their terrible living conditions. If an everyday person hated migrant workers for how dirty they were, the laborers must have been extremely filthy because people during the Great Depression were already living in dirty, below average conditions. Most migrant workers at the time were not well educated because people mainly focused on survival and the necessities, so learning how to read a book was not their top priority. In the book, the characters experience similar conditions to those of the migrant workers Steinbeck observed. "George stepped over and threw his blankets down on the burlap sack of straw that was a mattress" (Steinbeck 20). A straw bed is definitely not the highest quality, but it was what people were given at the time, and during the Great Depression people took anything they could get. Just like real migrant laborers, the characters had to sacrifice certain luxuries and pleasures in order to survive. They had to make do with what they could get even if it was just the bare minimum. The characters in the novel sleep on burlap sacks, with potentially harmful insecticides next to their beds, and overall dirty conditions. Despite these grimy living conditions, the characters still felt the necessity to live there. John Steinbeck also wrote about how lonely the life of a migrant worker was during the Great Depression: "They are never received into a community nor into the life of a community. Wanderers in fact, they are never allowed to feel at home in the communities that demand their services" ("Harvest"). Migrant workers at the time traveled far distances all across the United States just to find work. Because they moved around a lot and never remained in one place very long, they never became part of a community. They usually traveled alone and couldn't build connections with people where they worked because they never stayed in one place long enough to develop a relationship with the people in the community. This aspect of loneliness is represented in the book: "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place" (Steinbeck 15). Manual laborers were very lonely because they could travel all over the country but they never belonged to one place that they visited. In the novel, Lennie and George never found a place that they could call home. They were lucky because they at least had each other, but other characters in the novel were not as lucky. Other characters not only lacked a sense of belonging to a place, but they also didn't have anyone with whom to share their experiences, such as Curley's lonely wife, who is not allowed to talk to anyone and has no friends, and Crooks, who lives in a shack by himself and is never invited to participate in activities with the other characters. Recognizing elements of life that migrant workers went through gives the reader a greater understanding of the life the characters in the novel endured.

John Steinbeck did not have the best relationships with the women in his life. Out of the three times he was married, he was divorced twice. He also had two children, whom he never cared about or showed love for. John Steinbeck "...forced his first wife to have an abortion... Steinbeck was afraid that fatherhood would interfere with his writing" (Lister). John Steinbeck was so obsessed with working that he never showed any love for his family. Steinbeck didn't give his wife a say in the matter on whether she should have an abortion or not; he forced her to without her consent. His wife described this event as, "...the moment when love died" ("John"). Steinbeck was so preoccupied with his work that he would rather make his wife kill their future child over shortening his writing period. This obsession with working is represented in the novel. In the book, George and Lennie's fantasy about their dream life never consisted of a family with a happy wife and a house full of kids. In George and Lennie's fantasy, all they did was work. Their dream life was to work on their own ranch and it didn't include the 'distractions' that

John Steinbeck thought a family brought. Recognizing how John Steinbeck viewed women helps the reader understand how he developed the character of Curley's wife. When Steinbeck first met his third wife he, "...sat her down with Henning [his second wife] and told them both: "Whichever of you ladies needs me the most and wants me the most, then that's the woman I'm going to have" ("John"). John Steinbeck treated women as objects and didn't show any of his wives the respect they deserved. He treated women terribly and his view on them was skewed in the way that he thought of women only for pleasure. This objectification and poor view of women is shown in his novel through the character of Curley's wife: "'Don't you even take a look at that bitch. I don't care what she says and what she does. I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be'" (Steinbeck 36). In the novel, Curley's wife is given no respect at all. She isn't even given a name in the book. She is just addressed by everybody as Curley's wife. In the book, George tells Lennie right away to stay away from Curley's wife, but at that point they had only encountered her once and hadn't had a proper conversation together. George just assumed that she was bad without even getting to know her. Understanding Steinbeck's family life and his view on women helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the character's values in the book as well as the character of Curley's wife.

Recognizing elements of Steinbeck's life that are included in the novel helps the reader develop a greater understanding of the characters and events. In Steinbeck's life, when he worked as a manual laborer, he had to live through some rough conditions. He included this in his novel through the severity of the conditions the characters endured. The characters also took on any work they could find just like Steinbeck and other manual laborers because there was a shortage of jobs at that time. Similar to the novel, a migrant laborer's life was filled with filth and was very lonely. Living conditions were tough because workers had to accept whatever they were given. Also, migrant workers traveled often and commonly by themselves, so their lives usually didn't include deep relationships with other people. Another reason those relationships didn't occur is because workers weren't welcomed into communities so they never had an opportunity to plant any roots. Steinbeck had multiple wives and sons, for which he showed little affection. Steinbeck focused on work instead of family and his novel shows that. The dream for the characters in his novel is to get land and to work. It is not to start a family or become a permanent part of a community. Steinbeck's wives were not treated with the respect they deserved and likewise the female character in his novel isn't shown any respect from the other characters. Identifying components of Steinbeck's life helps the reader understand the portrayal of characters and events in the novel *Of Mice and Men*.