STEINBECKIAN IMAGERY IN "OF MICE AND MEN"

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Abstract: *Steinbeck is well-known for his appeal concerning nature, its exposure in his work and so the use of imagery in writing Of Mice and Men was no surprise to anyone. This paper points to the accentuated use of imagery that the author exposes while trying to portray an accurate image of the life the migrant workers had to endure. His vivid and clear tracing of characters and nature brings the readers closer to his protagonists empathizing with them in a more humane manner. The title of his novel is related to a Robert Burns poem dealing with the struggle of a mouse which is facing winter without the comfort of a secure home, although it had built it in advance. The human intrusion with nature is the reason why the mouse cannot continue with its life in the way that it had initially planned. The direct parallelism to the condition of the protagonists, who are also without a stable home arrangement, is meant to underline the resemblance people and animals share. Unfortunately, for Steinbeck's characters, the dream they have for a better future is doomed from the start, much as that of the poor mouse which is in danger of not surviving the winter.*

Keywords*: imagery, nature, animals, people.*

Of Mice and Men represents one of Steinbeck's most famous and well-read novels as it is not only studied all over the world, but because it brings out, in a very simple manner, many of the author's ideas related to individuals, communities and the harsh living conditions Americans were facing. Under the influence of the Great Depression, Steinbeck describes the fate of the common man, lonely and hopeless in his struggle to survive, dreaming about a future that will delay its coming. The writer seems to say, "this is the way things are," just as epitomized by the original title of the novel, "Something that Happened."[52]

Steinbeck is well-known for his appeal concerning nature, its exposure in his work and so the use of imagery in writing *Of Mice and Men* was no surprise to anyone. The title of his novel is related to a Robert Burns poem dealing with the struggle of a mouse which is facing winter without the comfort of a secure home, although it had built it in advance. The human intrusion with nature is the reason why the mouse cannot continue with its life in the way that it had initially planned. The direct parallelism to the condition of the protagonists, who are also without a stable home arrangement, is meant to underline the resemblance people and animals share. Unfortunately, for Steinbeck's characters the dream they have for a better future is doomed from the start, much as that of the poor mouse which is in danger of not surviving the winter:

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[52] The title Of Mice and Men was taken from one of Robert Burns' poems entitled "To a Mouse" that has become extensively popular being widely quoted: But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane, / In proving foresight may be vain: / The best laid schemes o' mice and men/ Gang aft a – gley / An' leave us nought but grief an' pain/ For promis'd joy // (Burns 2003: 28). In To a Mouse, Robert Burns intends to expand the mouse's situation to humanity while in Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck enlarges upon the experience of two migrant workers living in the Depression era to the human condition. The dreams of the two men are meant to never come true. The final part of the novel is similar to the destroying of the field mouse's nest by the ploughs of the men working the land and even though not precisely tragic it can be considered a part of the pattern life sequences: the plans men make for themselves are not safer than those of a mouse.

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"Steinbeck's use of the biological indicates a static view of human nature represented through simplistic rendering of nonhuman animals. From this perspective, human beings are no more than a sophisticated incarnation of animal drives and instincts, devoid of the nobler aspects that can characterize our species."[53]

The imagery the author wants to expose to the readers is meant to penetrate the belief that there exist inherent ties to the nonhuman beings having in mind the political, social, spiritual values that make men unique. However, the human spirit has to permanently be connected to the biological realities and relationships with animals. In a world where there is confusion about what it means to be human, the author is willing to make his readers wonder about their struggle to embrace feelings and behaviour proper for an individual and not an animal. Although critics have sometimes hinted at animalism when referring to Steinbeck's use of animal imagery, this negative part of human drives does not represent in any way the author's intention of bringing together the duality of man – physic and intellect – and the social urge of having the intellectual nature prevail over atavistic urges:

> The message in *Of Mice and Men* has progressed from the wholly negative vision of *In Dubious Battle*, as the characters manage to embrace their humanity regardless of their inability to control the outcome or direction of their lives. Thus, *Of Mice and Men* is an affirmation of human commitment and development that, while extinguished by unyielding circumstance, has value in and of itself.[54]

George never wants to give up Lennie but in the end he is forced by the circumstances and he gets to show his animalistic side. If through the novel his friend is the one regarded as the holder of the animalistic side as he does not have much understanding for the gravity of real life issues, in the end he is really the one trusting and appreciating his friend with no restraint.

The author's desire of introducing the readers in his protagonists' story leads him to start the novel with a detailed description of the place where George and Lennie are:

> A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foot hill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees – willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool.[55]

As nature is following its course the two men seem to only be intruding with their presence. Their footsteps are the hint of something going to change that will perturb the stable well-being of the animals, which is rather symbolic of the way in which Lennie dies, not knowing what to expect and barely perceiving what he had actually done:

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[53] Josephine Levy. "Biological and Animal Imagery in John Steinbeck's Migrant Agricultural Novels: A Re-evaluation" in *Between Species*. 1994, 10(1): 67.
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[55] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, 1993, p. 1.

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> On the sand banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little gray sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron labored up into the air and pounded down river. For a moment the place was life less, and then two men emerged from the path and came in to the opening by the green pool.[56]

The image of rabbits is recurrent throughout the novel as owning them is Lennie's ultimate goal. His main focus is of doing what is requested of him in order to obtain the privilege of achieving his dream. The desire to tend for the little animals and to prove that he is capable of being responsible for other beings, as he most definitely is not for himself, draws his attention to the actual dream of sharing a house with George. His friend's main concern is to keep Lennie out of trouble and make sure that unfortunate incidents such as the one from the previous farm never occur again. His re-telling of the event brings the readers close to visualizing Lennie's gesture and the following reactions: "So he reaches out to feel this red dress an' the girl lets out a squawk, and that gets Lennie all mixed up, and he holds on 'cause that's the only thing he can think to do."[57]

George wants to secure the chances of ever getting a home of their own, where there would be no boss and no orders. "To George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, for example, land represents fulfilment; out of their deprivation they dream of having land, and their dream is a need for identification. Without it they are alienated fragments of men, less than whole."[58]

While George is searching for a way to make his life matter, Lennie focuses on the rabbits and tries to listen to his friend's advice about the proper manner to behave in order not to create any inconvenience. The image of the little furry animals appears in a rhythmic pattern throughout the novel, from the beginning to the end. On the first page of the book, the author introduced the rabbits that make the scenery look like a place from Eden.[59] Using this image, Steinbeck foreshadows that something fearful will happen and all their dreams will be ruined in the end. The topos of the word however has a richer significance as in the mythology of the Amerindians a rabbit is a mediator between the human world and that of the dead. According to Chevalier's *Dictionary of Symbols*, the rabbit is the symbolic of the moon and in almost all mythologies rabbits represent an accomplished life full of happiness and pleasure.

Rabbits also epitomize the universe of the novel as Steinbeck foregrounds the rabbits many times so as to reveal Lennie's unfulfilled dream, as they are all he hopes for. They offer the simple "access" to the soft fur that he likes so much to touch. Rabbits are the source of comfort Lennie needs. Critics found an answer: rabbits played a major role during the Great Depression in the American society and especially in California. Even the U.S. Government encouraged the raising of rabbits for meat. In the 1940s the sales of rabbit meat were above those of poultry sales. But as America started to become prosperous, rabbits were no longer bought for their meat but as house pets.

In *Of Mice and Men*, they become the symbol of Lennie and, especially, of George's dream of having their own farm, their personal Garden of Eden. They hope to find there a location where they could lead a wonderful life. For the two, this *safe place*

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[56] *Idem.*
[57] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, 1993, p. 41.
[58] Todd M. Lieber. "Talismanic Patterns in the Novels of John Steinbeck" in *American Literature*. 1972, 44, (2): 267.
[59] As the rabbits are among the animals that populated Heaven at the time of Adam and Eve.

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is the farm that George constantly describes to Lennie: "Well," said George, "we'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter we'll just say the hell with going to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof…[60]

Many of Steinbeck's characters have a place they can retreat from life and try to find meaning and peace. In *Of Mice and Men* besides the dream farm there are the cave and the thicket in the willows, where the two protagonists find cover when in need. However, the spaces that Steinbeck chooses for his characters lead to all sorts of dreams and illusions and it becomes evident that they are actually helpless in front of the harsh living conditions and Lennie's special needs only foil their plans. So, the expectations of rabbits are mere hopes of a child as these symbolic ones will have the same end as the little animals crushed by Lennie's blundering strength. There is an inner condition he cannot control; he never means to do anything wrong, but he cannot help touching soft things with his enormous but sensitive hands. Unfortunately, he kills without intention everything he touches and there is no other way out for him, but to be treated in a similar manner to an animal. His underdeveloped mind repeatedly brings up the topic of furry animals (rabbits, mice, puppies), which offer him comfort. They are small and helpless and in need of caring and attention, as it is his case. His impressive exterior compared to his childish behaviour and innocent intentions represent Steinbeck's way of creating a contrasting image between what we see and what really is.

> The use of rabbits, mice, and puppies to represent the dream reveals the universal longing for comradeship and satisfaction within the human community. The softness and innocence of the creatures Lennie loves characteristically reveal the fragile and delicate nature of the romantic dream he clumsily, but earnestly, pursues.[61]

George and Lennie's story is meant to impress the readers waking them to reality as "He means to agitate, to provoke, to anger, to cause doubt and raise a multitude of questions. In the manner of Socrates, this is the first real step towards philosophising."[62] The author's intentions are those of making everything clear in his readers' minds. In order to do so he uses animal imagery reminding of his scientific interest and of the fact that we are so small in comparison to the universe. Lennie's height and aspect is similar to a bear's, meaning that he can frighten his enemies by having an obvious advantage, which discourages any violent act from others, who would never dream of beating someone so impressive: "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely and only moved because the heavy hands were like pendula."[63]

Steinbeck continues with the animal associations when he describes Lennie's habits; he "dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse."[64] Although

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[60] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, 1993, p. 18.
[61] Josephine Levy. "Biological and Animal Imagery in John Steinbeck's Migrant Agricultural Novels: A Re-evaluation" in *Between Species*. 1994, 10(1): 67.
[62] Hart, Richard E. "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection" in Stephen K. George (ed.), *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*. The Scarecrow Press Inc. Maryland: Lanham, 2005, p. 63.
[63] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, 1993, p. 4.
[64] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, 1993, p. 4.

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Lennie is viewed in connection with large animals, he does not seem harmful in any way. It is true that he could hurt people around and eventually he does, but there is no intention in his behaviour, just like an animal he acts based on instinct, not on reason. His reality is different from the one others envision and he feels more comfortable among animals than certain people. This might be the reason why he walks around with a dead mouse in his pocket. He does not want to admit the harsh situation they are in and refuses to accept reality. George, on the other hand is well aware of what is going on around them and, although at times is overwhelmed by his task of caring for Lennie, he appreciates the latter's loyalty, which is compared to that of a dog.

The dog image appears once again when Curley's anger is described as he is presented acting like a terrier which wants to show its anger at any cost and chooses to pick on taller and heavier men as he is quite the opposite image of such a a fellow "a thin young man with a brown face, with brown eyes and a head of tightly curled hair. He wore a work glove on his left hand, and, like the boss, he wore high-heeled boots."[65] This might be the reason why Lennie seems such a good target for Curley to release his anger and set straight things which can develop only in his imagination. Unfortunately, Lennie cannot be defeated so easily and when George agrees to let his friend take the lead in the fight Curley is so eagerly expecting there is no way out of the situation for him who is seen by everybody present "flopping like a fish." The humiliation felt by Curley is unbearable and this is one of the reasons why he is so willing to kill Lennie after the sudden death of his wife. His behaviour is that of a prey animal searching for his next victim¸wanting to take all his frustrations and place them on one single person who could make it all improve at emotional level once the rage is expressed.

> In Steinbeck's world, human beings do not operate on a plane above other life forms; they function as an extended and sophisticated species that retains an animal nature within. This nature is an integral reality that, once understood and accepted, aids in the journey toward a uniquely human spiritual fulfilment. This journey is explored, with increasing degrees of success.[66]

For Steinbeck's characters love, friendship and appreciation are the most important principles in life and this is the reason why George's ultimate sacrifice is that of saving Lennie from even more misery, while re-telling the happy story of their dream house and independence. However, there was no choice for George but to take

> the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering.[67]

The hills were echoing George's pain and Lennie's sad story of being excluded, just to spare him the pain of humiliation and misunderstanding. His inability to fit in the world is resented by his friend, whose gesture only shows commitment and infinite loyalty.

Throughout the entire novel it is obvious the accentuated use of imagery that the author exposes while trying to portray an accurate image of the life the migrant

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[65] *Ibidem*, p. 26.
[66] Josephine Levy. "Biological and Animal Imagery in John Steinbeck's Migrant Agricultural Novels: A Re-evaluation" in *Between Species*. 1994, 10(1): 67.
[67] John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group US, p. 105.

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workers had to endure. His vivid and clear tracing of characters and nature brings the readers closer to his protagonists empathizing with them in a more humane manner.

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