IMAGERY IN STEINBECK'S "OF MICE AND MEN"

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Abstract*: Imagery offers readers a mental picture of what is going on in a novel or short story.* Of Mice and Men *is one of Steinbeck's most vivid works as it helps the readers focus more clearly on the plot and remain connected to the novel. Steinbeck's words and details help create the complete picture of his work, giving the impression that one is living at the side of his characters. Everything is very visual and there is no difficulty in grasping the way in which the story will unfold. The author's craft is the one which brings readers in front of an analogy between human and animal life, showing pain, hope, struggle and eventually death.*

Keywords: *imagery, animal, behaviour.*

John Steinbeck's fascination with rural life has been expanded to many parts of his work, introducing in both his novels and novellas as many countryside personal elements as possible, which are meant to intertwine with the simple life of the people travelling for work, hoping to earn enough money to survive during the harsh life conditions portrayed by the author. His passion regarding the connection between nature and the human beings transcends his writing making the reader wander his imagination to the places so vividly described by the author. Steinbeck's talent for detailed imagery is interesting for readers who in their dependency to the text create an accurate mental picture of the situation.

Interested in the social environment of the people living in the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck is regarded as one of the most involved writers in the community life employing figurative language meant to attract the reader into the world of the plotline and manage to offer a unique perspective of the figurative language. The Depression Era with all the tragedies going around in the American society inspired the author to portray people, who instead of giving up still kept their dreams, as at the time it seemed the only solution for them to be able to go on and not break down, keeping some sort of mental and spiritual sanity.

Of Mice and Men is one of the most popular examples of Steinbeck's use of imagery as it abounds in obvious parallels between the human and animal appearance and behaviour. The title of the novel comes from one of the 18th-century Scottish poets named Robert Burns. His poem regarding a mouse's life, the way in which it works for building itself a nest to pass the harsh winter coming ahead and the way in which the ploughman destroys it in a matter of seconds, leaving the animal in a desolate situation is a great starting point for Steinbeck's novel. The mouse's desire to ensure a warm, safe life for the winter is swept away and it is faced with the harsh reality of cold and insecurity, not excluding a potential death. Steinbeck's idea is to take the mouse's situation and transpose it for the human kind, as his protagonists, George and Lennie, have a fantasy about buying a farm of their own, which in the end appears to be the one leading to one of them dying. Their plans and dreams are taken away in a very short period of time, leaving George sad and troubled. The destruction they suffer as their story unfolds is meant to impress any reader and to highlight parts of the American life, which are far from the optimistic perspective one might have regarding the all-fulfilling dream. Steinbeck's novel shows very clearly the chase for the American Dream and his

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protagonists' hope for the future. Unfortunately, their fate is not what they expect and in the end there is no other way out but death and suffering. George is forced to kill his best friend in order to save him the pain of being lynched by the workers from the farm they work on. His gesture destroys him, but we are presented with a desperate situation, from where there is no escape except death.

> One cannot escape the burden and the provocations of the story. Steinbeck, of course, offers no resolutions or sweeping answers. Such is not his purpose or function. 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. (Hart, 2005: 63)

From the very beginning of the novel the author makes use of animal imagery to draw the attention of the readers towards his characters. The two protagonists are portrayed in contrasting light as one of them is

> small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, 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. (Steinbeck, 1994: 4)

The story presented in the novel is inspired from real life, from the time when the author was working as a bindle stiff and Lennie was actually a real person, who did not kill a girl, but a foreman. The strength he had was observed by Steinbeck for the weeks they worked side by side.

Lennie is associated with a bear, so his height and weight are meant to impress the ones around him, offering him an advantage in front of supposed enemies. Steinbeck does not end his detailed description as he mentions that Lennie "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" (Steinbeck, 1994: 4). The strength that Lennie possesses is once again reinforced, hinting at his animal instincts. Many critics have perceived him as the embodiment of all the animal traces that people maintain throughout their lives. As Lennie is more associated to the animal part of his personality, it becomes obvious that there are not any mental benefits that Lennie could enjoy as he is somehow mentally underdeveloped and relies on George to solve the harsh problems of life. His similarities with a big animal bring to mind his inability to cope with reality at a level that would satisfy a mentally healthy human being. His inability to take care of himself and the slow movements that he makes reveal his harmlessness, or at least unintentional one. There are all sorts of accidents resulted from Lennie's misperception of his strength and of the manner in which he should handle animals and people around him. George tries to explain the implications of not handling situations as he should, but he is incapable of fully grasping the meaning of what he is being told. The mouse that Lennie keeps in his pocket, even though it is dead, is a symbol for his illusion that no more bad things would happen. He pretends everything is going the way it should and George does the same thing in what their desire about being their own bosses is concerned.

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George is a determined man, whose dreams are sincere, trying to take care both of himself and Lennie, offering his attention to his friend and always mentioning that he is responsible for him under all circumstances. Even tough there are times when George, being more aware of the reality around them, criticises Lennie and explains to him that life would considerably improve without him, is actually hiding his profound feelings towards him, as he understands that Lennie would never leave his side being as loyal as a dog (he is even compared to a terrier in the beginning of the novel), defending him and doing what he would be requested. The connection between them is that of brothers, the older one feeling the obligation to take care of the younger. The unconditional loyalty and complete dedication between the two is actually meant to survive all the obstacles. Unfortunately, Lennie does not benefit from such luck; although George always makes sure his friend is paying attention or is willing to follow the instructions by mentioning the rabbits that Lennie would attend at their future farm. This captures his whole devotion and he tries to behave as much as possible dreaming about the time when he could pet the tiny creatures as George threatens him "if you get in trouble, I won't let you tend to the rabbits." (Steinbeck, 1994: 17) The dedication that Lennie is somehow forced to show regarding his behaviour is guided by the chase of the feeling of content regarding happiness and satisfaction. For Lennie the American Dream does not only have to do with the farm George so beautifully describes, but also with his caring for some beings on his own.

The rabbits the protagonist dreams about are in his vision the symbol of the hope he needs to go on and not feel suppressed by his mental health problems. People treat him differently because he cannot properly adapt to the standards society requires of its members, so he needs permanent assistance. As John Timmerman points out

> Clearly Lennie is not a tragic figure, for he has nothing of the required nobility about him. But, in a sense, the deeper tragedy lies in his pathos; there is no place for a Lennie in society. Yet in the novel there is a kind of subtle reversal of animal imagery that makes animals of those who establish society's norms that disallow the survival of a Lennie. (Timmerman, 2009: 108)

In Lennie's case the most satisfying idea related to having their own farm is that of having his own rabbits to take care of and to pet whenever he wants. His aspirations are about becoming more responsible for some animals he enjoys petting, he is not directly interested in becoming a half owner of the farm, but rather enthusiastic for George's dream, as he is the one giving him hope for the future by reassuring him that there will come a time when they will work for themselves not living on someone's farm, working for and being paid by them. The fury animals that Steinbeck obsessively brings into question offer comfort to Lennie, because when he feels the soft fur of a mouse, he is left with a sense of accomplishment symbolising his warm heart and caring attitude trapped in a body, which he is unable to properly control, being, at times, incapable of realising the major pressure he is using upon the poor animals and the fact that they are instantly killed. The protagonist is searching for comradeship and he understands that the soft animals (mice, rabbits, puppies) that he enjoys petting are more similar to himself than some of the people. The animals ask for nothing in return of their loyalty, as this is his case, they just follow their masters, as he follows George. The softness and innocence of the creatures Lennie longs for is similar to his childish belief in the accomplishment of his dream of tending the rabbits on the farm.

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The image of the rabbits appears several times in the novel in a way predicting that something bad was about to happen sooner or later. The Amerindians regard the rabbits as mediators between our world and that of the dead, while Chelavier regards it as representing the moon; some other cultures just view it as the symbol for a happy and rich life with nothing to worry about. Steinbeck uses the visual element of the rabbits to hint at George and Lennie's dream of a better life, where they can totally be in charge of their fate. Their desire is to have a safe place of their own where each can lead a life without constraints. However, one might be able to easily see that the rabbits from their dream could not have a different fate from that of the previous ones that have been unwillingly killed by Lennie. In a way this leads the readers towards the end, when Lennie's inability to control his body properly kills his dream along with himself.

The novel shows from the beginning the two men on the road, trying to make their way to a new place where they could have a fresh start and where they could make some money to survive. The new farm they are accepted to work on is a place where they have to keep quiet about the reason they left the previous one, as George instructs Lennie several times to keep quiet and make sure he is the only one who talks. Their main concern is to try not to irritate Curley, the boss's son, too much, as he is always willing to fight anyone that does not take him seriously. He wears boots to distinguish himself from the rest of the workers, his aggression being so overwhelming that few people actually like him, the others fearing his fits and violet reactions. The obvious contrast between Curley who is "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." (Steinbeck, 1994: 26) and Lennie is the reason why the former feels the need to try and provoke his "opponent" in order to show his superiority. Curley is described like a terrier, embodying the aggression that lies within him. His temper is that of someone trapped between anger and frustration, not understanding his wife and trying very hard to maintain himself in control. The moment when Lennie finally uses his strength to show Curley his behaviour is not adequate in the situation in which the person he picked on could hurt him so badly and so quickly that he stands absolutely no chance, eventually "flopping like a fish". Lennie has the strength of a bear as Steinbeck describes from the very beginning leaving no doubt for the readers about the imagery of his work, or about the animalistic power that one might embrace. As Curley is humiliated there is again a coming back to his complex that his is not one of the *big guys* "Curley's like alot of little guys. He hates big guys. He's alla time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy. You seen little guys like that, ain't you? Always scrappy?" (Steinbeck, 1994: 28)

The conflict that is created between Curley and Lennie is just one of the elements that lead to the final gesture that George is forced to make. Lennie's innocence and inability to grasp the allusions that Curley's wife was making around the men on the farm combined with his pleasure of stroking soft things, lead to his touching her hair much harder than anyone could stand and so he kills her, without any knowledge.

The author makes the obvious parallel that by previously comparing Lennie to an animal he was referring to the instincts we have inside, but by comparing Curley's wife with the poor animals that have died before he reinstates the conviction that bigger animals will always win and that the small ones should take cover.

Steinbeck's choice of scenery for Lennie's death is that of the mountains framing the small events of the protagonists' lives. They are so small in contrast with the surrounding heights and "the darkening mountains represent the mystery of death, carefully sustained in the minor imagery of the heron seizing and eating the little water

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snakes." (Timmerman, 2009: 106) The men like Lennie are utterly crushed by the society, as it is somehow previewed by Candy's dog, which had to die because he was a cripple and there was no use for him anymore. Even though Lennie was a good workman, there was no possibility for him to control his body and his curiosities at a maximum level. There is no place for people who live in and for a dream. The reality must be tangible and this is exactly what the author presents when he introduces such characters. This is the reason why they had to flee the first farm, as his desire for feeling soft fabrics or animals could not be refrained. Due to his tall figure the touching of a girl's red skirt resembled some sort of invasion and his gesture was not viewed with positive attitude. The need society feels for the unitary group to develop and keep safe is the exact attitude which excludes the Lennies one might encounter. This is the reason why George was led to raising

> 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. (Steinbeck, 1994: 105).

It has been discussed that Steinbeck intentionally pointed to the animal imagery because he wanted to evaluate our position toward the less fortunate ones, who by lacking the clear logic and perception of life feels a great difference between himself and the other people. Lennie, even though is a giant, with a child's heart, ends up like a little rodent in front of fate and society, which give him no excuse for his mental problems. There is no other way, but a rather violent one to get him out o the way of the ones who want to live longer and better, without interference and strange companions they should take care of. Like the image of the snake enjoying the pool Lennie enjoys dreaming about the rabbits, but when the time comes the *herons* take both their lives.

> A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically. (Steinbeck, 1994: 98)

The novel's imagery is put together like a puzzle, one with a happy end, but one which is realistic and suggestive. Steinbeck marks the insight of the human self and the conditions of living in the US during the Depression Era. He was aware of the difficulty one might face in a time of frustration and resentment and that is why he pursuit his ideals making use of fictional methods not tested before. "

> John Steinbeck's exact place in the history of the American novel and his contribution to the evolution of the novel form are yet to be determined. Too much prejudice is still attached to his life and too much confusion still surrounds his goals and methods for any kind of objective assessment to be made at this time. Nevertheless, when that assessment is made, I think those who make it will be bound to acknowledge that frequent use of scientific attitudes and methods in his fiction which took him beyond the tradition of Naturalism-Realism into an achievement purely his own. (Benson, 1977: 264)

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