

## A Teachable Good Book: Of Mice and Men

There is one good reason for reading John Steinbeck's short novel Of Mice and Men—it is a very good book.

There is one good reason for teaching it—it is a teachable good book: simple and clear, yet profound and beautiful.

Of Mice and Men is a book to use to show beginning readers the paths to greater books which might at first be too difficult for them. This short book is easy—in the accessible sense. But it is not “easy” in the moral sense: it raises large issues of the sort raised in and by the greatest and often more difficult literature.

For Of Mice and Men is a Tragedy, a tragedy not in the narrow modern sense of a mere ‘sad story’ (though it certainly is that), but a tragedy in the classic Aristotelian/Shakespearean sense of showing humanity's achievement of greatness through and in spite of defeat.

Some people seem to believe that the function of literature is to provide vicarious “happy endings,” to provide in words a sugary sweetness we would like to have but cannot always get in real life. To such people, true literary tragedy is distasteful. But the greatest writers and the best readers know that literature is not always only mere sugar candy; it can sometimes be a strong medicine: sour perhaps—at least to the untrained taste—but necessary for continued health:

Take it; if the smack is sour,  
The better for the bitter hour.

(A.E. Housman)

Some readers may object to the book's presentation of low class characters, vulgar language, scenes suggestive of improper sexual conduct, and an implied criticism of the social system. But none of this is presented indecently, or beyond the ordinary norms of contemporary literature. Compared to many modern works, (or to movies and TV) this book is tame indeed. Furthermore, these features are necessary in this book in two ways.

First, they are part of the accurate precise reporting of the reality of a particular time and place and environment. Part of Steinbeck's literary point is that this is true to life. As such, the dirty details are part of Steinbeck's enlargement of the realm of Tragedy, the democratization of the tragic world. Traditionally, the subjects of Tragedies have been Kings and other Great Ones: Job, Oedipus, Lear. But Steinbeck's point—a truly American point—is that all men are created equal: Tragedy exists even among the lowly of the earth; even the least of us—even a Lennie or a George—has the human potential for tragic nobility. Of Mice and Men is a tragedy in the modern tradition of The Hairy Ape and Death of a Salesman.

Second, the grossness is a way of presenting briefly the complex turmoil of life. This book is not stereotype melodrama. It is not a simple-minded book. There are no purely bad people in it. Conversely, there are no purely good people in it either. All the characters are complex mixtures of good and bad, or rather of bad results from good intentions. They are all—in their ability and in their outlook—limited. And they live in a gross and dirty world. Given their position in that world, they are not able to achieve much. But they are trying to do the best they can; they are trying to be good people and to have good lives. They have good intentions. They have noble aims.

The tragedy is that, limited as the characters are, the world they live in is even more limited; it is a world in which the simplest dream of the simplest man—poor dumb big Lennie—cannot come true. “The best laid plans of mice and men gang oft a-glac [go oft a-stray],” wrote Robert Burns in the poem which provides the book's title and its theme. And Steinbeck's story shows why: The best laid plans go oft astray because they come in conflict with one another. The simplest good intention—simply to stay alive—of a simple mouse, a simple pup, a simple young woman, is thwarted by Lennie's urge to pet something soft and beautiful. Lennie's drive to touch beauty kills the things he loves.

But his problem is the same problem that bothers Curley, the Boss's son, the closest thing to a villain in the book. Like Lennie, Curley doesn't know how to hold on to what he finds important: his young wife, his status as the Boss's son, his reputation as a man. He loses each by trying to hold on too tightly. Curley's aim to be a respected husband/boss/man is foiled by his own limited abilities.

The similar but simpler aim of Lennie and George to have a small place of their own where they can “live offa the fatta the lan' ” is doomed to frustration also by their own limitations and the tragic chain of circumstance and coincidence that ends with Lennie dead by George's hand.

The point, of course, is that they all—we all—live in a too limited world, a world in which not all our dreams can come true, a world in which we—all of us some of the time and some of us all the time—are doomed to disappointment. The tragic dilemma is that for our basic humanity, for the goodness of our aims, we all deserve better than we get. But because of our

human limitations, by our weaknesses of character, none of us is ever good enough to earn what we deserve. Some philosophers, seeing this dilemma, pronounce profound pessimism for humanity. Some religions promise for this world's disappointments supernatural intercession and other-worldly compensations. The tragic viewpoint (the view of Shakespeare, the Greek tragedians, the Old Testament Job, and John Steinbeck) finds in it the chance for nobility of soul: even in the blackest of disappointments, a human can achieve individual greatness. One may be defeated physically—but one need not be crushed spiritually. One can remain true to one's dream and true to one's friend. We humans may die, but we can love one another.

Friendship: Love. That too is what Of Mice and Men is all about. Lennie and George, disparate types, are, against all good reason, friends. They share a good dream. They love one another. They are too limited, too inarticulate, to know how to say it, but they do show it—or rather Steinbeck shows it to us readers.

So the book treats the great themes of Dreams and Death and Love with simple powerful clarity. It does so with a classically elegant structure—another reason for using the book as a teaching tool: it allows a reader—especially an untrained or beginning reader of literature—to see (or be shown) how structure supports and presents content. Of Mice and Men has the classic situation/complication/twist/and/resolution plot structure uncluttered by diversions, distractions, or subplots. There is an inevitableness, a starkness that makes the point of the story unavoidable.

\* The story has the classic "unities" of time and place and action. It begins in a small spot of beautiful nature, a secluded camp in the woods by a stream; it moves to the buildings of a California ranch, and ends back in the woods by the stream.

\* The style is simple: clear, direct sentences of description and action, direct quotation of the speech of simple people. Few long words, no hard words.

\* The action is simple: two poor and vagrant workers, big, dumb Lennie and small, clever George, take jobs at a large ranch. Lennie has trouble with the Boss's son, Curley. Lennie accidentally—more or less—kills Curley's wife. George kills Lennie to save him from the horrors of a lynch mob led by Curley, bent on revenge.

\* The settings are simple in detail, and simply powerfully symbolic. The secluded spot in the woods by the stream is the uncomplicated world of Nature; the bunkhouse is the bleak home of hired working men trying to make sense of their lives and gain comfort in a limited environment; the barn is the place of working life, of seed and harvest, birth and death; the harness room with Crook's bunk symbolizes social constraints; the "little place of our own" about which George and Lennie dream and all too vaguely plan is the Paradise on earth we all hope for.

The characters, too, are simple yet significant. "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find you have created a type," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald; "begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing." Steinbeck begins with individuals: clearly and sharply crafted characters, a whole set of individuals who are so clearly realized that each—without surrendering individuality—becomes a type, an archetype, a universal character: There is Candy, the old, one-armed worker with no place to go, as useless as his toothless dog; there is Carlson, gruffly and deliberately "unfeeling," who can coolly kill old Candy's ancient dog simply because "he stinks" and "he ain't no good to you"; and there is Crooks, the dignified "proud and aloof" but helpless and lonely victim of racial discrimination. There is Slim, calm, reasonable, compassionate, the real leader of men. And there is Curley, the arrogant but inept Boss's son. The man who could lead well does not have the position; the one who has the position and the authority is not a true leader.

Curley hides his insecurities behind a mask of macho toughness. His competitive bravado makes him push too far and Lennie, after enduring much, is given permission by George to "get him." Lennie in self-protection crushes Curley's fist in his own big hand, crippling Curley somewhat as Candy and Crooks have been crippled by the punitive harshness of life.

Curley is also the one man who has a woman. But clearly he does not—does not know how to—relate to her as a person. She is to him a thing, a possession, a sex-object and a status symbol. For the men, in braggadocio, he flaunts the sexuality of the relationship; and yet, out of his own self-doubts he is intensely jealous of the men's awareness of her.

The young woman has no name—she is merely "Curley's wife." She knows she wants—and somehow deserves—something better than this. "I don't even like Curley," she says of her husband. She has gratuitous ambitions of being a Hollywood star "in the pitchers." She is a lost little girl in a world of men whose knowledge of women is largely limited to memories of kind old ladies and rumors of casual prostitution. All these men are afraid of Curley's wife, afraid and aware that her innocent animal appeal may lead them into temptation and trouble. In self-protection they avoid her. Only Lennie, in naive goodness, actually relates to her as a person to a person. She talks to him. For a little time they share in their aesthetic sense; they both admire beauty. Unfortunately, she is too naive, and Lennie is too strong and clumsy. In trying—at her invitation—to pet her lovely hair he is panicked by her quick resistance, and ends by killing her. Just as he had earlier killed a puppy and a mouse. Curley's wife, a naive Romantic, wants love and tenderness in a harsh crude Naturalistic world; Lennie, big and ignorant, tries to give love. But he is too weak in the mind, too strong in the body. His tenderness is too powerful for weaker,

unsuspecting creatures.

We readers can identify with Lennie. We sympathize; we empathize. We care. We have—most of us—been in his position: not quite able to cope with the complexities of the world around us, wanting only security, peace, comfort, and something soft and beautiful to pet and love.

Perhaps one reason that this book has evoked controversy and censorious action is that it is so simple and clear and easy to understand—and so painful! It hurts to read this book. And some people don't like their books to hurt them; they want soothing. But great Tragedy is meant to hurt. One needn't subscribe wholly to the Aristotelian doctrine of 'catharsis' by Art to see that one function of literature is to help us deal with the pain of real life by practicing with the vicarious pains of tragic art.

Of course Of Mice and Men contains unpleasant attitudes; there is brutality, racism, sexism, economic exploitation. But the book does not advocate them; rather it shows that these too-narrow conceptions of human life are part of the cause of human tragedy. They are forces which frustrate human aspiration.

Lennie and George have a noble dream. They are personally too limited to make it come true, but they do try. They try to help each other, and they even enlarge their dream to include old one-handed Candy and crippled black Crooks. Theirs is the American Dream: that there is somehow, somewhere, sometime, the possibility that we can make our Paradise on earth, that we can have our own self-sufficient little place where we can live off the fat of the land as peaceful friends.

What is sad, what is tragic, what is horrible, is that the Dream may not come true because we are—each and all of us—too limited, too selfish, too much in conflict with one another. "Maybe everybody in the whole damn world is scared of each other," says Slim. "Guys that go around...alone...don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time."

What is ennobling in this tragedy of mice and men is the Revelation of a way beyond that loneliness and meanness and fighting, a way to rise above our human limitations: Two men—Lennie and George—who have nothing else, do have each other. "We kinda look after each other." says George. And they do have their Dream. And the Dream is there even in the final defeat. For in the end the one thing George can do for Lennie is to make sure he's happy as he dies. He has Lennie "look down acrost the river like you can almost see the place." And as Lennie says, "Let's get that place now," George kills him mercifully. It's a horrible thing to do, and George knows that. And we know that. But in this limited world in this limited way it is all that George can do for his friend. And he does it. That is the horror and the nobility which together make up Tragedy. The Tragic pattern closes. There is a sense of completeness, of both defeat and satisfaction.

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck has shown us something about the pain of living in a complex human world and created something beautiful from it: in true great literature the pain of Life is transmuted into the beauty of Art.

The book is worth reading for a glimpse of that beauty—and worth teaching as a way to show others how such beauty works.

Thomas Scarseth  
University of Wisconsin/LaCrosse