The split dark rider: An examination of labor conflict and John Steinbeck's Of mice and men

Richard Stephen Sabolick

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THE SPLIT DARK RIDER: AN EXAMINATION OF LABOR
CONFLICT AND JOHN STEINBECK'S *OF MICE AND MEN*

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
English Literature

by
Richard Stephen Sabolick
March 2005
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ABSTRACT

Critical analyses of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* portray the book as a morality tale depicting man's limitations in an unchangeable society. These approaches divorce the text from the other books Steinbeck was writing at the time and do not show it connecting to the Depression-era themes of *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Of Mice and Men* does relate these themes on a metaphorical level and combines the migrant story of *The Grapes of Wrath* with the leadership story of *In Dubious Battle* to reflect Steinbeck's perception of the failed union between Dust Bowl migrants and communists in 1930's California.

George and Lennie wander into a ranch tormented by "hard work...and wasteful expenditure" (Marsden 247), which resembles 1930's California where migrant workers were lured by high wages only to find horrid circumstances forcing them to wastefully expend their dreams. The novel's workers, like California's migrants, need a hero; this comes in the form of George and Lennie who, like a metaphorical Dark Rider, rescue this society. George reflects the hero's mind: the 1930's migrants struggling to maintain a capitalistic dream in an excluding system. Lennie represents the hero's heart: the misplaced American
communists leading these migrants. Though George and Lennie crush the cycle's enforcing hand and give characters a glimpse of a better life, the victory is temporary. This reflects Steinbeck's understanding of the great 1930's strikes; they end with the migrant mind killing the communist heart and cause the dream to become permanently unattainable.
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I would like to thank the extraordinary English department of California State University, San Bernardino—your knowledge and expertise has allowed me to fall in love with the language I use every day. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the readers of this thesis who so diligently guided me through this undertaking, especially Suzanne Lane—your vast insight and undying patience made this project possible.
DEDICATION

To Grandma Sabolick

Your faith and devotion taught me how to hope.

You're my hero.
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CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE AND LENNIE: STEINBECK’S SPLIT HERO

Introduction

A few months ago Californians watched a labor dispute between the United Food and Commercial Worker’s Union and the supermarkets that employed the workers they represented. This dispute centered around a new contract in which large grocery chains such as Safeway and Albertson’s proposed to cut their employees’ health benefits by more than fifty percent and lower their wages. While the grocery chains argued that the proposed cuts were needed because of lost revenues due to such grocery chains as Wal-Mart moving in and stealing customers, the unions argued that this was simply a ploy to increase profits and destroy the gains that had been made over the past century (Cleeland A17).

Meanwhile, thousands of workers were locked out and temporary replacement workers were hired to take their place (Cleeland A17). Though this strike was resolved with the workers avoiding wage cuts but paying slightly higher prices for their medical insurance, it proved to be the longest strike in the United Food and Commercial Worker’s Union. At the heart of this strike were issues central to
the American way of life. Issues such as decent wages are important in the twenty-first century, yet are not new to disputes between labor and management.

In the 1930s, while the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, California was witnessing its own disputes and demonstrations. Unlike the peaceful exhibitions we see today, the demonstrations being staged then were ending with picketers being wounded and killed (Majka 76). In Central California, where farmers were cutting wages and causing workers to live in camps that resembled city dumps, these workers’ demonstrations were crushed with especial brutality (America and Americans 78). Articles in publications like The Nation and The New Republic reported weekly the demonstrations’ endings, stating them in terms of “tragic records” that held “scanty hope for a peaceful solution to our national problems” (Elvin 242).

Around this time, John Steinbeck traveled to Central California to witness firsthand the struggles of the workers who were involved in these disputes. What resulted were three novels dealing with the lives of these workers and the struggles they faced. In Dubious Battle (1936) tells the story of a young man named Jim who, tired of labor’s victimizing system, joins up with a radical sect
of demonstrating pickers in California and ends up being killed in the process. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) tells the story of the Joad family traveling from Oklahoma to California in search of work, only to be victimized by the industrialized system they find. Finally, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) tells the story of two men entering a California work ranch and temporarily changing it with their dream of a better life.

While both *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have been critically viewed as social novels dealing with Depression-era politics, *Of Mice and Men* is typically regarded as a simple morality book dealing with society’s treatment of its “animalistic” members (Cadullo 12). In these arguments, Lennie is typically viewed as a dimwitted mouse to George’s man, and “just as Lennie ‘loved’ the mice, the puppy, and Curley’s wife so much that he inadvertently killed them, so too [...] George loved Lennie so much that he wound up having to kill him” because of the way society rejected his animalism (Cadullo 12). These arguments typically show the novel reflecting the cruelty of a society that does not accept those who
are different.¹ Though these criticisms are enlightening for they show the humanistic aspects of the story, they fail to consider the temporary change that George and Lennie's dream brings to the ranch's culture.

In one such example, literary critic Warren French argues that George and Lennie's dream dies because of the "natural limitations of man himself" and it is not viewed as having changed anything (45). Characters like Crooks and Candy, whose lives are shaped and whose outlooks are changed by having been included in the dream, are dismissed as being as hopeless as George and Lennie. In the typical discussion of Of Mice and Men, these characters simply stand as pictures of "humanity's vision, the capacity to dream, [which is] infinitely greater than the ability to realize this dream," but are never viewed in terms of how their ability to dream shapes their characterization (French 45).

Arguments like these fail to consider the characters that have their outlooks changed by George and Lennie's

¹ See Howard Levant's The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study and Bert Cadullo's "The Past is the Present the End in the Beginning: The Mouse as Symbol in Of Mice and Men" for examples of these arguments.
dream. Though this change is brief, it creates in those characters a new sense of confidence. We see these characters finding a new sense of brashness and cunning when the dream becomes nearly actualized. Crooks, who is typically reserved and fearful, is able for once to stand up to Curley’s wife in Chapter Four, telling her to get out of his room for she has no right to enter a colored man’s living quarters (78). Candy also finds the courage to taunt Curley in Chapter Three when he mumbles “Vaseline” under his breath, joining the other men in their ridiculing of the boss’s son. Though these outbursts happen rather quickly and are easily overlooked, they would quite possibly never have been vocalized if it were not for the prospect of these characters’ escape from their oppressive institution.

Though George and Lennie may not be considered heroic in the classical sense, as they “have nothing of the required nobility about them,” in this thesis they will be considered heroic because of the sense of hope they bring to the ranch society with the dream they carry (Timmerman 100). Steinbeck, while discussing George and Lennie’s role in Life in Letters stated, “only heroes are worth writing about” (563). This notion is central to understanding George and Lennie as being two halves of one distinct
heroic role. George and Lennie function as a split hero; each occupy a half of a moving force that comes into a society, makes a dream nearly actualized, and then has this dream crushed by the ever-imposing structure of that society.

In this thesis it will be argued that Of Mice and Men is not only a tale of morality, but also a representation of the political issues found in In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath; Of Mice and Men takes these issues and presents them in a simplified format. This thesis will establish that Steinbeck does not simply divorce himself from the labor themes of the other two books; rather, he uses this novel as representative account of the social events taking place in California during the 1930s.

In this chapter, George and Lennie’s split heroic role will first be defined the context of the setting into which they are placed. It will then be shown how their actions lend evidence to depict this split-heroic role; this will be done so that we may come to a better understanding of how this role functions in the representative account of the turbulent labor conflicts that the novel is portraying.
The Pulp Hero of *Of Mice and Men*

To better understand George and Lennie's role, Steinbeck provides us with one brief but pivotal scene in the middle of the novel which establishes their heroic position. In Chapter Three, we find a young man coming into the bunk house where the other characters live. This worker is depicted as the typical victim of the labor system entrapping all of the other workers; his shoulders are bent forward, and he walks heavily on his heels as though he is carrying "an invisible grain bag" (45). Once the worker goes to his bunk and puts his hat on his shelf, he picks up a pulp magazine and hands it to Slim. Readers may note that when the bunkhouse is described earlier in the narrative, these pulp magazines are revealed as being placed in the boxes above every man's bed, for the men "love to read and scoff at and secretly believe" the stories they hold (18). This nameless character then asks Slim to read an editorial letter in the magazine.

A man named Bill Tenner who worked at the ranch as a cultivator driver three months prior had written this letter. Apart from being given a brief description as a "hell of a nice fella," he is never again mentioned in the book (46). Though the description of Tenner is
inconsequential, the letter he writes illuminates the split-hero of the novel. It reads:

Dear Editor, I read your mag for six years and I think it is the best on the market. I like the stories by Peter Rand. I think he’s a whing-ding. Give us more like the Dark Rider. I don’t write many letters. Just thought I would tell you I think your mag is the best dime’s worth I ever spent. (45)

Through a critical reading of Tenner’s letter, we find it working on three different levels. First, Steinbeck seems to use the Tenner letter to depict the workers’ preferred genre of writing, thus illustrating the social class of the heroes inspiring them. These pulp magazines were not forms of high literature and were written for the less sophisticated segments of society. They often told romantic stories of heroes coming into societies terrorized by villains and violently rescuing them. According to historian John Dinan, “while the pulp story did not live by action alone, action provided 95% of the story” (53).

Though the stories in these pulp magazines were simply written to provide their readers with some cheap diversion, they provided the men with stories of
hyper-masculine heroes like the Red Revenger, Kid Curry, and Wild Bill Hickock, who inspired them to dream of heroes in their own world. These heroes "held disdain for worldly accomplishment," and, like the men who read about them, often wandered into towns looking for work to temporarily sustain them (Gressley 314). These heroes' stories followed a prescribed plot line that usually started with a description of the setting. From there they followed a dictum of the heroes venturing through a town, rescuing damsels and shooting villains—all which they never originally set out to do.

Recognizing the lower-class function of this genre, Steinbeck not only includes the pulp magazine as a social definer of the ranch workers who were reading them, but also as an indicator of the heroes to whom these workers looked for diversion and admiration. By the 1930's, "these types of magazines had run out of original story lines and characters" and were relying on editorial comments from readers like the fictional William Tenner to direct the stories' plots (Kelton 50). The construction of these heroes and their actions had therefore become a direct reflection of the desires of workingmen who were reading them as a means of passing time. Though these stories were never intended to be an educational medium, and "their
function was low-cost escapism, entertainment pure and simple," they did provide an illustration of the idealized hero as he lived in the minds of those working class men who were actively constructing him in the 1930s (Kelton 51).

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck uses this stock hero as a model for his own novel’s heroic figures, George and Lennie, as well as for the larger social figure of the striking workers of the 1930s whom these characters are representing.² Like any great American pulp hero, George and Lennie “have no past, no patrimony, no siblings, no family” (Hoffman 229). They are wanderers. Steinbeck defines them in this way to make the qualities of this split heroic role more understandable for his reader and to demonstrate the historical workers for which it stands.

The third and final use of the pulp fiction genre is as an illustration of the futility of life in the novel’s setting. Though the workers who read about and secretly believed in the “Wild West” lived and worked in the westernmost expanse of land in the contiguous United

² This larger social figure will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.
States, the West in which they lived had become a very different place from the West depicted in these magazines. Instead of an independent land where the only law was the law of the gun, California was a place marked by its lack of open space and unincorporated frontier. In the novel's opening, in what seems to be a fertile wilderness setting where "the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green" (1), it soon becomes apparent that:

this is not quite virgin landscape: a path has been worn by boys from a nearby ranch and by tramps, while in front of a sycamore limb that has been 'worn smooth by men who have sat on it' there is 'an ashpile made by many fires'. Even the tranquility of the scene is undermined by the fact that it offers only a brief respite on the journey between two jobs. (Marsden 292)

This new West is no longer a place of excitement and adventure; it is simply another place that has been enveloped by the large-scale farming structure of work without reward. In publications such as The Lone Ranger Magazine, the men read about ranches where cowboys herd cattle and justice is "meted out with strong, fair hands," yet when they put down their magazines they are confronted
with ranches where justice is considered working men to the point of having bent backs and rickety knees (Marsden 292).

These kinds of men are represented throughout Of Mice and Men. From the ostracized African American horse caregiver Crooks, who has a bent spine, to the elderly Candy who lost his hand on the work ranch, the characters in the book depict a class of men whose bodies and minds have been shaped by the work they have endured (46). Whereas the unincorporated frontier of the American West in these pulp magazines does much to excite the psyches of the men who read about it, the reality of this new West seems to do just the opposite: it strips their pleasure and renders them unlikable.

This stripping of the men’s pleasure can be found throughout the book with comments made repeatedly by George regarding the men working on these ranches. He states:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake, and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other
ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.

(15)

From the tone of this passage and the wording of such phrases as “poundin’ their tail,” we see that these men are treated like animals who have no other purpose than work. This labor creates a life that is lonely and unrewarding.

Like a Dark Rider figure, George and Lennie come into a western society looking for work. This ranch society bears a striking resemblance to that of a pulp magazine’s. From its very description as a “ranch” and not a work camp or a labor site, Steinbeck seems to mark the setting as that of a western pulp story. Not only is this ranch located in the West, but it is also overseen by a villain: a cruel and overbearing supervisor (Curley) who makes it his lot to cause the other characters miserable. We see this throughout the book as Curley bullies the weaker men and threatens to fire the stronger men. It is for this reason that George tells Lennie in the second chapter to stay away from him because “he always wins” (29).

Also like a pulp hero, George and Lennie are not a part of the society they wander into. Unlike the African American stable man Crooks, the swamper Candy, or the villain Curley, who are permanent fixtures on the ranch,
George and Lennie are, like any typical pulp hero, a step outside of it. This outsider quality of their role in the story is reflected repeatedly through such events as the way George tells Lennie in the first chapter to escape if he gets into trouble and the way the other characters look at them as odd for traveling together.

The Hero’s Split

Throughout the book we find George and Lennie being portrayed as one figure. Yet unlike a typical pulp hero like the Dark Rider, Steinbeck illustrates each of his protagonists as possessing only half of the traits of one, idealized hero. George holds the mind of the hero and Lennie embraces the body and soul.

According to Howard Levant’s The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study, Lennie serves as a representation of the “exaggerated instance [...] of the division between mind and body,” while George “fills out [his] pattern to complete [the] whole man” (135). Lennie possesses the physical strength and the pureness of heart of a hero while George possesses the rational thinking and coolly collected control of the same hero. If these two men were molded into one character, he would surely be the ideal balance of strength and intelligence and would serve
description resembles those workers whose backs have been shaped by their work.

Though Lennie is described as being George’s opposite in this scene, this opposition only seems to enhance the singular persona of the two characters. Though this duality could be read as Steinbeck’s attempting to contrast the characters, the fact that they travel together, dress alike, and depend on one another, seems to give credence to the notion that instead of opposing their traits, Steinbeck is really showing how the two compliment each other. By composing them as opposites in every physical feature, the author seems to indicate that if George’s small physical frame and Lennie’s huge frame were put together, they would make the perfect, average-sized male. Likewise, George’s sharp features combined with Lennie’s shapeless face would make a man with ideal features. These physical features only work to enhance the emotional and mental attributes of George and Lennie, which are also opposite and serve to indicate the halves of this heroic figure.

In this first scene, Steinbeck enhances the single-heroic persona of George and Lennie’s role by describing them in one paragraph. In every other character description of the book we note that characters are
described separately and that no one description paragraph is devoted to portraying more than one individual. This seems to lend further evidence of Steinbeck's desire to have George and Lennie's role be considered as one figure throughout the book.

It is not only this physical description that shows George and Lennie acting as one individual in the novel; they are also dependent on one another for survival. Lennie is reliant on George for his thinking while George is dependent on Lennie for his emotional stability and morality. These qualities represent the two halves necessary to any hero who must "be pure in heart and motive, and steadfast in the face of danger" (Dinan 61).

For example, just before the description of Tenner's letter, Slim and George enter the bunkhouse and Slim begins to question George about the relationship he has with Lennie. He states that "It jus' seems kinda funny a cuckoo like him [Lennie] and a smart little guy like you [George] travelin' together," to which George replies:

---

3 We find the other major characters being described with paragraphs on the following pages: Candy (19), Crooks (49), the boss (21), Curley's wife (31), Slim (33), Carlson (35).
It ain’t so funny, him an’ me goin’ aroun’
together [...] Him and me was both born in
Auburn. I knewed his Aunt Clara. She took him in
when he was a baby and raised him up. When his
Aunt Clara died, Lennie just come along with me
out workin’. Got kinda used to each other after
a little while. (39)

As George and Slim’s conversation progresses, a
reader comes to a better understanding of how George and
Lennie complete each other and create a single gallant
figure. George tells Slim that Lennie is the only kind of
family he has and how Lennie keeps him from becoming
called up. He explains how he has seen workers who work
the ranches alone and states, “they ain’t no good. They
don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They
get wantin’ to fight all the time” (40). This leaves us to
assume that Lennie is the reason that George does not
become like these other workers. George is able to remain
calm and balanced because of Lennie.

While Lennie is portrayed as being a character who
has no capacity to be mean, it is this quality that keeps
George noble and true. Unlike the other workers who become
angry as a result of their loneliness, Lennie never really
becomes angry in the book. The only instance in which
Lennie becomes enraged is in Chapter Three when George is talking about his tending to the rabbits on their future piece of land. When George tells Lennie that they will have cats, and that Lennie will have to make sure that the cats do not get the rabbits, Lennie begins to breathe hard and states, "you jus' let 'em try to get the rabbits. I'll break their God damn necks. I'll [...] I'll smash 'em with a stick" (57).

Lennie's anger is truly a righteous anger that comes about as the result of his thinking about a situation of a stronger creature preying on one that is weaker. Like a pulp hero who becomes enraged by the prospect of a few hooligans terrorizing a town, Lennie becomes enraged at the prospect of the terrorizing cats. His anger is childlike, and makes George a more perfect individual.

Though George tells Lennie throughout the book that he would be better off by himself, he does so in a halfhearted manner. Lennie's childlike nature serves to represent a pureness of heart and simplicity of taste that George lacks. He seems to give George a reason for living in the novel as well as a constant reminder that the transient life he is sustaining is only temporary. Lennie keeps George's hope of attaining a better life alive by providing a constant reminder of the better life they will
have when he repeatedly asks George to tell him about “the rabbits.” When he does this, George is then forced to stop and tell him:

We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don’t have to sit in no bar room blowin our jack jus’ because we got no place else to go [...] 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 live off the fatta the lan’.

(15-16)

By stating that they both have somebody to talk to “that gives a damn,” George sets Lennie and himself apart from the other characters who are weak because they are in a state of isolation. Unlike these characters, George and Lennie are able to look to one another for strength and confidence. They can pool their money and save for a home, and can always rely on each other’s company; because of the company they give to one another, the two can dream of an enhanced existence.

Lennie is not only important to George’s survival, he is also crucial to the survival of the dream of “living off the fat of the land.” Without him, this dream would die. Lennie provides George with companionship,
responsibility, and a future. Whereas other workers live from day to day with no sense of hope, Lennie causes George to look to the future and dream of a better life. Without this, George’s emotional stability and his standing as a moral man would fade away and he would become like the other ranch workers who are emotionally and morally depleted, “blowin’ their jack,” because they have no future vision.

If Lennie is necessary in making George an emotionally and morally complete man, George is necessary in making Lennie a mentally complete man. Though Lennie has superior strength that can be matched by no other worker, he has no mind to control this strength. The novel opens with him and George fleeing another ranch in Weed because he could not control his might. George describes Lennie as being “jes’ like a kid,” and tells Slim in chapter three that there is no real harm in him with the exception that he is so strong (43).

Throughout the book we find that Lennie is reliant on George for his survival. From Chapter One when George tells Lennie that he should not drink so much from the pond because he will get sick to Chapter Six when he tells Lennie to look out across the river and remove his hat in his final moments, George controls Lennie because Lennie
cannot control himself. In essence, George functions as Lennie's mind.

As the characters' descriptions indicate their standing as one heroic figure in the novel, so do their actions. In the genre of the western pulp magazine, John Dinan states:

The pulp Western super hero, although not possessed of superhuman or supernatural powers, was a cut above the ordinary mortal. He could absorb more than his share of punishment [...] and was characterized by immediate action in response to a dilemma or conflict which was always external--a burned out ranch or a murdered friend. (37)

The sharing of punishment is an obvious point at the end of Chapter Three when Curley is hitting Lennie repeatedly, and George tells Lennie to fight back. It is only when his face is dripping blood and one of his eyes is closed and cut that Lennie can take no more of the punishment Curley has inflicted on him and retaliates.

It is in this scene that we find George and Lennie acting as one. Because Lennie lacks the mentality to discern when he should lash out, he must take the external physical penalty Curley is doling out until George
instructs him to take no more. Likewise, while watching
Lennie being hit, George takes more than his share of
emotional punishment at seeing his friend being beaten for
no reason. The tone of his voice reflects this anguish as
he yells to Lennie, “get him” and “don’t let him do it,”
though the giant cannot hear because he is too absorbed by
the shock of his tormentor’s blows.

Though the split of Steinbeck’s hero is beneficial in
that it makes both of the halves stronger, in this scene
we find the drawbacks of the split: when one of the
characters makes a choice, both are tethered to the
consequences of that choice. While Lennie is being beaten,
George can do nothing but watch. He can not jump in to
help Lennie for he knows that if he does, he and Lennie
will surely be fired. If Lennie is allowed to take all of
the beating, at least George still has a chance of
continuing work. His cunning works, for he knows that with
Lennie’s strength, the injury he will give to Curley will
be able to pass as an accident, and it does.

This “punishment” is simply for Lennie smiling at the
thought of a dog he will own on his future ranch. In
essence, Curley is punishing Lennie for dreaming of a
better life. With this subtle indication, Steinbeck leaves
us pondering Lennie’s fate. Had it not been for George’s
insistence that Lennie fight back, or had Lennie not heard George when he finally shouted his instructions, Lennie’s life could have ended. If not for George controlling his actions, Lennie would never have known to defend himself.

The consequences of the heroes’ split can be seen clearly in this scene. Had this been a singular hero being hit by Curley, he would have had the wits and strength to fight for himself. Being an averaged sized individual though, this perfected Dark Rider would probably not have been attacked by Curley. As established earlier, Curley only hates men who are larger than himself. This is the logic that hinders him from attacking any of the other averaged-sized individuals like Carlson and Candy who are actually performing the taunting.

To Curley, Lennie represents all of the qualities that he despises. Not only is he a giant, he is also pure of heart and humble. Lennie’s righteousness causes Curley to become enraged. And because Lennie cannot think for himself, Curley sees him as the perfect target for his angry outburst. When he sees Lennie smiling, dreaming of a better life, Curley becomes infuriated and unwisely lashes out at the protagonist.

It is also in this violent scene that we find George and Lennie acting in an immediate response to a dilemma.
Though fighting Curley would have nothing but negative consequences for George and Lennie, George, the smarter half, must tell Lennie to fight back, otherwise he could die. When Lennie finally hears George and understands that he must retaliate, instead of swinging back at Curley and creating a long, drawn-out brawl, the giant simply grabs Curley’s hand and squeezes, thus ending his attacker’s advances as quickly as they began.

This quick ending to his attacker’s clouts shows a heroes’ immediate response. Like any pulp hero who has taken all he can, this crushing of Curley’s hand depicts an immediate and effective response to a situation with no real positive ending. Had George shouted to Lennie “swing back” or “fight him,” Lennie’s blows to Curley would probably have killed him, thus resulting in an immediate execution of Lennie. However, because Lennie is simply instructed by George in this scene to “get ‘im,” Lennie’s grabbing Curley’s hand is the response that has the least consequence. Though Lennie crushes the hand, he does not kill the oppressor. The result is good for Lennie, George, and Curley.

For the other members of the bunkhouse, this action releases the tension that exists between themselves and Curley. Before Lennie crushes his hand, they fear Curley,
for he can fire them. After his hand is crushed, however, Slim is able to intimidate him to the point of lying about the incident and telling the boss that he got his hand caught in a machine. From this point on, Curley never really regains the intimidating power he once had. Even Curley’s wife has lost respect for him when she sees that his hand has been broken; this is most evident when she tells Lennie in Chapter Five to break Curley’s other hand if he tries to fire George.

This fight scene is not only important in establishing George and Lennie’s heroic identity, but is also important in understanding the historical account of California’s field workers that these characters are serving to represent. These field workers were also split; however, when they collectively combined together, they were, like George and Lennie, able to temporarily crush the hand that was oppressing all California field laborers in the 1930s. Though George and Lennie’s split, like that of the striking farmers, does have the negative consequence of not allowing them to be unified in body and mind, it makes them stronger. They can rely on each other for might whereas the other members of the society can rely on nobody. This pairing gives an indication of Steinbeck’s notions of the power that can be achieved when
militant workers and radical leadership rise together to face the metaphoric hand of economic exploitation. Just as George and Lennie caused Curley's power to be undermined, the movement of the exploited field workers and their communist leaders caused the growers' power to be undermined.

In Of Mice and Men, George and Lennie's role is definitely heroic. Like any highly elevated pulp hero, the security they offer the society they wander into is "that of absolute rightness combined with force" (Hoffman 227). They work together to bring to a social order the prospect of a better life. For a time, they are successful in their endeavors. In the novel, George and Lennie dream of not having to experience the daily exploitation of a domineering boss; the men and women of 1930's California dreamed of not having to be exploited by the system of industrial farming that was slowly and steadily killing their will to survive.
CHAPTER TWO

1930’s CALIFORNIA: THE NEW WILD WEST

Social Order and Disorder

In order to understand George and Lennie as a split pulp hero, we first need to critically view the setting into which the characters wander. In doing so, we will gain a better understanding of the heroic qualities of the role they share in both the novel’s literal and representative settings. When we look at the ranch society closely, we find the novel’s simplistic location bearing a striking resemblance to California’s industrial system of agriculture in the 1930s.

Like a pulp Dark Rider who wanders into a ruthless “land where the only law [is] the law of the gun,” George and Lennie wander into a land where an independent system of law is absent (in the novel, law on the ranch is controlled by the boss and Curley) (Dinan 36). When Lennie kills Curley’s wife in Chapter Five, there are no sheriffs immediately called to arrest him; instead, the men of the ranch form a posse under the leadership of Curley to chase after him and mete out justice. This type of vigilantism was also present in the fields of California in the 1930s as groups of men would band together under the leadership
of the large-scale growers to put an end to workers' strikes.

Similarly, as the Wild West was a place that was untamed and at times cruel, so is the setting of the ranch. Lennie, noting the atmosphere of the ranch, pleads with George in Chapter Two to leave it. He tells him, "Le's go, George. Le's get outta here. It's mean here" (33). The fields of California, like the novel’s work ranch, were ruthless in the treatment of their workers. According to historian Cletus Daniel, large-scale growers "tended to regard labor only as a factor of production, and sought through any means available to reduce the costs of labor to the lowest levels possible" (24).

The farming labor structure in 1930's California did not highly value the humanity of its workers. Historians Theo and Linda C. Majka state how it sought to exploit them by constantly lowering wages and enforcing living conditions that were hardly suitable (Majka & Majka 51-52). As the ranch setting of the novel was, in Lennie's eyes, "mean," so was the system of industrial farming in California. This system of agribusiness:

sought to influence the supply of labor in ways that would guarantee that farmworkers were available in adequate numbers when they were
needed and at a cost that would not endanger the
profits that constituted the fundamental motive
of large scale growers. (Daniel 25)

This profit motive drove not only the supply of labor in
California, but the maintenance of order as well.

California’s Corporate Farming

When California entered into the Union in 1848, much
of its land was under the rule of an aristocratic system
whereby a few landowners would own huge tracts of lands
(Daniel 18-19). When California became a part of the
United States, this type of land ownership simply
transferred from Mexicans owning the land to Anglos owning
the land. When these new monopolistic Anglo owners
converted their stretches of land to agriculture, it was
virtually impossible to employ any other system of tending
the land besides wage labor.

Small, family-operated farms like those found in the
Midwest, which relied on a small set of hands to tend the
farms, would not work in the state because the stretches
of land were typically so vast that this type of labor
would be ineffective. Likewise, a sharecropping system
that was found in the southern portion of the United
States would also not work, for this system also relied on
a small set of workers that were tied to the land to tend to crops. With the shift of crops from extensive cereal yields like wheat to fruit and later vegetable production in the latter 1800s, crop rotation became a permanent fixture in California's agricultural economy.

This type of rotation became necessary in keeping the soil of California fertile and the production of California's crops at a peak. What would be in season one month would quickly be harvested and a new crop would be planted in its place (Daniel 18). This rotation, coupled with the vastness of the farms found in the state, created an environment where the system of sharecropping would simply not work. So there developed in California a massive system of industrialized farming that relied on wage labor to perform the tasks of planting, tending and harvesting crops. According to Max J. Pfeffer's "Social Origins of Three Systems of Farm Production in the United States," what developed in California in the latter 1800s was "the prototype of a fully developed capitalistic agriculture. Landholding [was] highly concentrated and...wage workers in agriculture, like those in urban industries, owned no means of production" (542).

Steinbeck portrays this type of farming in The Grapes of Wrath:
And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it. And some farms grew so large that [...] it took batteries of bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss; chemists to test the soil, to replenish; straw bosses to see that the stooping men were moving along the rows as swiftly as the material of their bodies could stand. (256)

In this passage, Steinbeck depicts the erosion of the family-owned agrarian ideal in America and depicts the "farm factory" system that has taken its place. The stooping men that are captured in this piece serve as the representation of the most important piece of this system, the labor force. According to Pfeffer, "labor intensive harvest operations in areas characterized by specialized crop production [...] call for the employment of an extremely large work force for very short periods of time" (543-544).

As we saw in Chapter One, it is this type of work force that George and Lennie are a part of in Of Mice and Men. They come to a work ranch along with a group of other men, perform necessary work for a short period of time,
and then move on to another job. They, like thousands of other workers, have no ties to the land nor to the work they do. When George states, "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place [...] they ain't got nothing to look ahead to," he seems to be speaking for all workers caught in the farm factories' labor cycle (15).

In these words Steinbeck depicts the emotional void that occurs when man is divorced from the work he does. George's words portray the loneliness and isolation that result from a system of labor without reward. Steinbeck uses this isolation to set up his split-heroic role of George and Lennie; he uses these characters as a representation of all workers who are divorced from the temporary, exploitative work they do.

When George and Lennie come into the work ranch, they are faced with a group of men who, like themselves, are the victims of a cycle of work without lasting remuneration. Characters like Candy and Crooks, who have been crippled by the work they have done, and characters like Slim and Carlson who, though not crippled, are caught in a system where their desires are "regulated to the margins and incorporated into the capitalistic economy that governs the normative world of the ranch," are all
victims of this isolating system (Person 2). As George
describes them, “they come to a ranch an’ work up a stake
and then they go inta town and blow their stake, and the
first thing you know, they’re poundin’ their tail on some
other ranch” (15). To Steinbeck, this type of life seemed
to be suitable for the foreign worker, for he was usually
drawn to California by the prospect of good wages,
typically came from a “peon class” and was not an American
who was looking to settle in California permanently
(America and Americans 73). This foreign laborer had the
opportunity of escaping this type of life by either
voluntarily or involuntarily immigrating back to his
homeland.

California’s Foreign Labor

From the beginning of California’s agricultural
industry, workers have been brought to the state to fill
the need for the short-term, labor-intensive crop
harvesting. The face of this labor force has changed
throughout history. During the last half of the 19th
century, Chinese immigrants were used because they were
considered to be docile, industrious, and trustworthy
(Daniel 27). However, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882\(^4\), many farmers stopped employing these immigrants for fear that there would be a backlash from other farmers. This resulted in the employment of the next wave of immigrant workers, the Japanese. This group was highly valued both for its willingness to work through wage pools that often took the lowest pay offers and for its background in agriculture. According to historian Cletus Daniel, "Having come almost exclusively from their homeland’s agricultural class, Japanese farm-workers were usually highly skilled at the types of jobs waiting for them on California’s industrialized fields" (Daniel 74).

Though many Japanese were used in the fields of California during the turn of the century, because they began acquiring their own land and driving up the price of their labor, they soon came to be a group that was despised (Majka 47-48). In 1913 the Alien Land Act was enacted to prevent any foreigner from owning land, and in 1924 the Federal Immigration Act prohibited any more

\(^4\) Certain legislators who desired a return to an “agrarian ideal” passed this act in an attempt to cut off the supply of labor that was shaping California’s agricultural economy into one that was industrious in nature (Daniel 32).
Japanese from immigrating to the United States. These two acts spelled the end of Japanese labor in California’s agricultural fields.

This in turn left California’s large-scale growers looking for a new labor pool. The first place they looked was the Philippines. Since Filipinos were colonial subjects to the United States, they were able to easily enter the country (Pfeffer 546). By 1930 there were 30,000 Filipinos in California. However, with the depressed economy and the formation of the Filipino Labor Union in 1934, this group became a scapegoat for much frustration; in the same year, the Philippine Island Independence Act gave the Philippines its independence and allowed the United States to ship many of these laborers back to their homeland.

Like Filipinos, Mexicans were also used for their labor and then sent back to their homeland when the Depression hit California. According to Pfeffer, "by 1920 there were 100,000 Mexican workers in California. Many Mexicans came to the United States as seasonal farm workers and returned to Mexico after the harvest" (547). However, with the increased numbers of dustbowl-stricken white Americans coming to the state from places like Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, many of these Mexicans were
deported and did not return because of the political
stability they found at home.

The New Wave of Workers

In the 1930s a wave of white immigrants came from the
depleted farmlands of America's dust bowl. Pfeffer states:

White American workers had generally avoided
agricultural labor in California because of the
depressed wages common in that area of
employment. However, employment-hungry dust bowl
migrants were forced to seek such employment
during the depression. Between 1935 and 1939,
140,000 able-bodied workers from the dust bowl
region arrived in California. (547)

After the peak years of migration, historians Patrick H.
Mooney and Theo J. Majka state in their Farm Workers,
Agribusiness, and the State that the majority of the
laborers working in California's fields were white (136).

John Steinbeck chose to write about this group of
migrants in his novels In Dubious Battle, The Grapes of
Wrath, and Of Mice and Men. While surveying the conditions
of these migrants, Steinbeck made the distinction between
them and the immigrants who came before. In an article
published for The Nation in 1936, he states:
The drought in the Middle West has very recently made available an enormous amount of cheap labor [...] For a time it looked as though the present cycle would be identical with the earlier ones, but there are several factors in this influx which differentiate it from the others. In the first place, the migrants are undeniably American and not deportable. Secondly, they [...] are refugees as surely as though they had fled from destruction by an invader. In the third place, they are not from some peon class, but have either owned small farms or have been farm hands in the early American sense [...] They have one fixed idea, and that is to acquire land and settle on it [...] They are courageous, intelligent, and resourceful." (73)

Steinbeck viewed these migrants as a depiction of the highest form of endurance and patience. These were people who did not desire to work and then go back to some distant land, but rather, were Americans who, like George and Lennie, desired a dream centered around land ownership and permanence.

When George tells Lennie, "someday we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re gonna have a little house and
a couple of acres [...] and live off the fat of the land," it seems that he is using the voice of these thousands of migrants who were coming from various parts of the country in search of a new life (15). These were displaced individuals who had come from lives that have all but been destroyed by the effects of environmental catastrophe. When they arrived in California, they faced a system all too ready to exploit them.

To California's farming industry, these white migrants' arrival symbolized the industry's maturity (McWilliams 199). When these migrants came to California in desperate search of work, they found that:

The industry was organized from the top to bottom; methods of operation had been thoroughly rationalized; control tended more and more to be vested in the hands of the large growers; and the dominance of finance was greater than ever [...] the California farm factories began to witness the cessation in the influx of new alien racial groups as white workers began to enter the farm factories [...] farm industrialists [...] began to manipulate the flow of labor to their own advantage. (McWilliams 199)
These workers were thrown into a structure where a co-op of large-scale growers controlled labor and wages in order to keep wages as low as possible (McWilliams 189). In this system of corporate farming, California growers relied on an employment exchange or agency that would "estimate the labor requirements for the coming harvest season, fix a prevailing wage rate and then proceed to recruit the necessary workers" (McWilliams 189).

According to Carey McWilliams, by 1933 the wage for the typical California field worker had decreased from 30 cents an hour to 12.5 to 15 cents an hour, even though the total value of farm production in the state had risen from $372 million in 1932 to $421 million in 1933 (266). This was a direct contradiction to the rationalization of cutting wages due to the depressed economy that was being given to workers. During this time "profits had increased and production had been multiplied many times through the stabilization of prices and rationalized methods of operation" (McWilliams 190). Under this system, field workers no longer worked for individual growers who were tied directly to the land, but were employed by an industry that was managing vast farms for profit.
Reacting to this manipulation, Steinbeck journeyed to California and wrote in "Dubious Battle in California" that:

[...] during the spring, summer, and part of the fall [workers] may find some kind of agricultural work. The top pay for a successful year will not be over $400, and if he has any trouble or is not agile, strong, and quick it may well be only $150." (America and Americans 74)

He further illustrates in this article how these migrant families would travel to various camps looking for places to settle during jobs. These families had a choice of either living in the grower’s farm camps that would cost $4-8 per month (this would be paid back to the growers, therefore giving them even more profit) or residing in squatters’ camps. The grower’s housing would consist of "one room, no running water; one toilet and one bathroom [that was] provided for 200-300 persons," while the camps consisted of "squalor beyond anything [the migrants had] yet had to experience and intimidation almost unchecked" (America and Americans 74-75).

Steinbeck describes this type of intimidation as typically consisting of deputy sheriffs (employees of the
grower’s associations) driving up and down the rows of tents and looking inside to memorize the faces of the inhabitants. In an article published for the San Francisco News, Steinbeck looked at the life of one family of six who were forced to live in a squatter’s camp. He tells how the family lives in a tent that is rotting; they have one mattress, one quilt and a piece of canvas for bedding. As the article progresses, he tells how the father had once owned a store and his family had lived in the back of it; however, due to the drought, he was forced to move and is living in poverty. As the story ends, Steinbeck narrates, “dignity is all gone, and spirit has turned to sullen anger before it dies” (America and Americans 80).

In Of Mice and Men, the typical field worker’s life is illustrated through the workers’ shared living space. The bunkhouse resembles a prison in that it is simply a “long, rectangular building [...] the walls [are] whitewashed the floor unpainted. In three walls there

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5 Steinbeck illustrates this type of intimidation in the 19th chapter of The Grapes of Wrath when the Joads are constantly being harassed by deputies while in one of these camps.
[are] small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch" (18). In this description Steinbeck illustrates the essence of the workers within these walls, for the workers' lives are equally desolate and bare. Their only chance of flight is through small windows of hope through which none of them can ever truly escape. The door of their dreams is blocked by the large wooden latch of a system of work without reward:

   Trapped within a vicious cycle of hard work, low wages, and wasteful expenditure, the 'guys' who work the ranches are perpetually exploited and then, like Curley's dog, put out to a 'pasture' they cannot own. (Person 2)

Crooks, who has worked at the ranch for longer than most of the other workers, tells Lennie in Chapter Four, "I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches [...] they come, an' they quit an' go on [...] 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" (72). Like the workers who migrated to California in search of a better life, these men struggle daily for menial wages, spend these wages on nothing more than keeping themselves alive, then must move on to find other work in similar circumstances, thus unendingly setting themselves up for
further exploitation. These characters, like the thousands of workers who came to California in search of a better life, needed a hero to end their exploitation.

Unionization and Art

As the conditions of California’s workers became worse, the workforce steadily began to turn to unionization to try to change their circumstances. Unionization had been prevalent throughout the 1920s as Filipino and the Mexican workers formed groups like the Worker’s Union of the Imperial Valley to fight exploitation (Daniel 108). These unions, however, were spread out and separated from one another until the end of 1929 when the Communist Party of the United States became involved. According to Cletus Daniel:

Toward the end of 1929 the Communist Party of the United States, having proclaimed itself the new best hope of America’s toiling masses, resolved to try its hand at accomplishing that task. And though they, too, were destined to fail in the end, in the early 1930s the Communists did provide the forceful leadership that was conspicuously absent in earlier organizing efforts among the state’s
farmworkers. Once fully joined, this volatile combination of farmworker militancy and radical leadership produced one of the most turbulent and eventful chapters in the history of agricultural unionism. (109)

The communist leadership of the time came to be known as the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (CAWIU). The primary tasks of this group were to follow strikes and help organize and lead them (Majka 74). Though wage issues were at the heart of most of these strikes, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union also demanded such things as union recognition, preferential hiring through the union, and hiring without discrimination. According to historians Linda and Theo Majka:

[The] CAWIU also raised a number of secondary control issues reflecting the local situation of strikers: improved housing, an end to evictions from grower-maintained labor camps, and abolition of charges for living quarters [...]. (76)

In 1932, a fruit workers' strike in Vacaville became the first organized effort of the union (Majka 76). In this strike, communist organizers led about 400 workers,
and held out for sixty days. They protested wage cuts and poor working conditions; their actions resulted in forty vigilantes kidnapping six leaders, flogging them with straps, and pouring red enamel over them. This broken strike began a wave of similar strikes throughout the state.

In April of 1933, a pea pickers' strike occurred in De Coto-Hayward. The strike involved about 3,000 workers protesting a $0.12 per hour wage rate (Majka 75). Though this strike was settled with gains for the pickers, it left one man dead and many more injured. After this particular strike, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union became involved in a strike of 1,000 cherry pickers in Mountain View and Sunnydale. Again, the strikers made some gains in wages but suffered casualties.

As the number of strikes increased, so did the amount of vigilante response (Daniel 93). The vigilante groups were composed partly of prominent citizens who would beat, threaten, and intimidate strikers. These vigilante groups worked closely with the regions' growers and deputies to maintain the exploitation of migrant workers throughout the region.

Steinbeck, witnessing these methods of intimidation while he traveled to Arvin, California in the summer of
1936, reacted with his writing. In his “Dubious Battle in California” he wrote:

The effect has been far from that desired. There is now in California anger instead of fear [...] the men will organize and the large growers will meet their organization with force [...] It is fervently to be hoped that the great group of migrant workers so necessary to the harvesting of California’s crops may be given the right to live decently, that they may not become avengers of the hundreds of thousands who have been tortured and starved before them. (76-77)

It was not only Steinbeck’s nonfiction that was influenced by the social conditions of these workers. In 1936 he published In Dubious Battle which centered on a man named Jim Nolan who journeys to California as a union leader and ends up dying for the cause. In this book, Jim learns that:

a lot of guys’ve been believing this crap about the noble American working-man, an’ the partnership of capital and labor. A lot of ‘em are straight now. They know how much capital thinks of ‘em and how quick capital would poison ‘em like a bunch of ants. (327)
In In Dubious Battle Jim sees firsthand the vigilantes wreaking havoc on striking apple pickers. In the book, the men strike because their wages have been cut and they and their families have been reduced to living in squatters' camps. Like Of Mice and Men, In Dubious Battle portrays migrants working in jobs that lead nowhere and depicts this as robbing their will to live. Though Jim is killed at the end of the book, he depicts a man who, like Steinbeck himself, felt in tune with the causes of working men who could never hope to own anything from the work they performed for the large-scale farming industry in California.

This type of industry is also shown unfavorably in The Grapes of Wrath as the Joad family becomes the quintessential migrant family journeying to California from Oklahoma in search of work. In this book, Steinbeck also depicts people who cannot hope to peacefully achieve any improvement in their working and living conditions. Though the strikers' plight is depicted in this novel, it only seems to serve as a backdrop to the struggle of the Joad family. It seems that while In Dubious Battle works to show this struggle in terms of the men and women involved in it, The Grapes of Wrath uses the struggle to show what happened to those migrant workers who did not
become involved in the struggle--they, like the Joads, were left destitute and victimized by the system of exploitation that was in place in California during the Great Depression.

While In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath serve as Steinbeck's literal stories of the strikes of these workers, Of Mice and Men is his symbolic tale of the struggle. Written in a novelette-play form that was easily adapted to the stage, the book, according to literary critic John H. Timmerman, "is one of Steinbeck's most compressed and unified works. Nonetheless, it achieves an artistic richness of structure and theme that ranks it among the best of his works" (Timmerman 95). It seems that through its simplistic structure and its original title of Something That Happened, Steinbeck desired it be viewed as a representational account of something that happened in the fields of California during the Great Depression.

Of Mice and Men presents a small-scale version of the top-down Californian farming system in place in the 1930s through his depiction of a group of workers and the boss that they must work under. According to critic Leland S. Person, "the ranch economy is patriarchal and capitalistic [...] the hierarchy descends from the boss through his son Curley to the jerkline skinner, Slim, and then to the
workers” (2). This representation is crucial to understanding the social strata that was in place on California’s farms and how Steinbeck perceived them. In the novel, we find each character working to represent the various factions of California workers who were caught up in this Depression-era labor system in the 1930s. From the top of this social structure to the bottom, Of Mice and Men gives a representational depiction of who the system worked to help and who it worked to exploit.

At the top of this social structure is the small-statured boss. He is described in Chapter Two as stocky and stepping into the room “with short, quick steps of a fat-legged man” (21). His small size and wide girth coupled with his representative place seems to indicate not only the small size of the labor bureaus established in the 1930s to hire workers, keep production up and keep wages low, but also the smallness of the character of these agencies. While there were many workers bidding for work on the farms of California throughout the thirties, there were only a small number of powerful men hiring them and controlling their earnings (McWilliams 189-90). While there are eight characters mentioned in the novel, there is only one boss who is responsible for their hiring. This seems to be reflective of the labor bureaus that kept
those who were controlling the agencies fat with profits at the sake of exploiting the workers they were hiring (thus the symbolic economic fatness of the boss in the novel).

As discussed in the previous chapter, this boss is depicted in Chapter Two as wearing high-heeled boots with spurs. These shoes seem to show that he has an issue with his size, and for this, he must compensate by wearing heels. These boots seem to symbolically illustrate a group of hiring agencies that, though small in number, were large in the intimidation they held. Not only was their number small, but so was their moral fiber, as seen by the wage cuts they put into place and the living conditions they forced their workers to endure. The boss’s shoes also contain spurs “to prove that he [is] not a laboring man” (21). By equating these spurs with his social status on the ranch, Steinbeck gives an indication as to how this man oversees those he hires; like the agencies that owned the land in the thirties, he sees that his workers are driven like horses and then put out to pasture when they are no longer able-bodied. Because this boss is only described once, he becomes Steinbeck’s representation of those large scale labor bureaus such as “the padre of workers” who, though hiring people to work the land, were
mostly absent from the daily tasks of managing it (McWilliams 191).

This next tier of the farming social ladder is depicted with the boss's son Curley. In the book, Curley represents co-ops such as the Associated Farmers of California, an association of several large-scale landowners who pooled together to structurally manage their lands and dictate labor policies. It was these co-ops' responsibility to make sure production stayed up while wages stayed down (Daniel 251). This was done by methods that:

- consisted of a statewide anticommunist propaganda campaign to arouse public feeling against the [CAWIU];
- political agitation to deny federal relief to striking or voluntary unemployed farmworkers;
- a drive to enact antipicketing and other legislation in agricultural counties as a means of breaking farm strikes;
- and a scheme to eliminate the union leadership through the use of the state's criminal syndicalism law. (Daniel 252)

Through his intimidation of the other characters in the novel, Curley comes to represent the hand of the Associated Farmers controlling the field workers.
This controlling hand is first illustrated in the book by Curley being a boxer. This clearly indicates that he uses his hands as weapons to bully the workers into doing what he wishes. The glove he wears on his left hand and the Vaseline he wears under it to keep it soft for his wife further illustrates this control (27-28). Since Vaseline is a lubricant, the methods he uses to control are denoted as being slimy and uncouth. The same hand Curley keeps soft to please his wife is the hand he uses to threaten the men who work under him. While Curley is said to brag about this at the beginning of the novel, the laborers find it dirty (28).

Like the Associated Farmers' methods that attempted to keep the unionization of workers in check, Curley also works to keep the laborers he has under him in check. When he is first introduced in the book, he gives George and Lennie a cold glance that then turns "calculating and pugnacious" (25). He seems threatened by these new characters and seems to know that they will be trouble for him--especially Lennie, who represents all of the characteristics (a large body and a pure heart) that Curley despises.

From this introduction, Curley immediately begins to intimidate Lennie by making him talk when he does not wish
to. In this scene he steps "gingerly" close to Lennie and asks him if he and George are the new guys that his father was waiting for. When George answers for Lennie, Curley automatically tells George, "let the big guy talk." When George replies, "S'pose he don't want to talk?," Curley's response is to lash his body around violently and say, "By Christ, he's gonna talk when he's spoke to" (25-26).

Curley's words seem to come straight from the mouths of those vigilantes who were responsible for disrupting the strike of 4,000 apple pickers in August, 1935. During this disruption, "two leaders were subsequently tarred and feathered, and the home of one of the strike organizers was shot up and tear gassed" (Mooney & Majka 134). By taring and feathering the leaders, the vigilantes seem to have tried to make an example of those who disrupted social order by not being done as told, just as Curley attempted to do to Lennie in his first scene in the novel.

Though a laborer, Curley enjoys a position that is a cut above the ordinary worker for he cannot be fired. Like the relationship between management and workers, Curley's relationship with the other characters in the book is one that is strained. The silence that falls over the other workers' conversations whenever he enters a room and the
suspicious gazes he gives the other workers whenever he enters the bunkhouse indicates this strain.

The novel portrays Curley as being short like his father; however, unlike his father, Curley hates men who are larger than himself. Candy tells George in Chapter Two, "Curley's like a lot of little guys. He hates big guys. He alla time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy" (26). When taken in the context of the novel's representative stance, this point of Curley's hating men who are larger than himself becomes important in understanding Steinbeck's view of the disdain that the small number of greedy land owners had for those large groups of dignified people working on their fields. By linking the boss's small stature to that of Curley, we find that both have a smallness of character that is reflected in the way they treat the ranch workers. Their main difference is that while the boss tries to hide his smallness by wearing boots, thereby appearing nobler than he actually is, Curley outwardly hates those who are tall and does nothing to hide it.

Furthermore, Candy describes Curley as gaining privilege from his size, for if he fights a larger man and wins, he gets praise from the other workers; if he fights
a larger man and loses, the rest of the workers will be inclined to say that the larger man should pick on someone his own size and might gang up on him for revenge (26). Through Curley's size and the benefits he gains from it, Steinbeck further illustrates the large scale farm owners in the 1930s and the effectively daunting tactics they used to control their workers. Like Curley, if the small number of land owners were seen as fighting large groups of strikers for the sake of keeping their farms running, the larger society praised them for keeping anarchy at bay. This was seen in the grape picker's strike in September of 1933, when, after vigilantes' violence broke the strike, the editor of the Fresno Bee wrote, "Fortunately for the best interests and welfare of the state the criminal syndicalism law still is on the books." The editor further encouraged the authorities to use the law as fully as possible in suppressing the strikes, as he saw them as an attempt by communist leaders to overthrow the United States' government (Daniel 161). Likewise, if these strikes were unable to be suppressed by violent means, then authorities would portray the strikers as being "nothing but a bunch of rats, Russian anarchists, cutthroats, and sweepings of creation" (Daniel 164).
This system kept these large groups of workers in a system of labor without reward, while growers reaped the profits of their labor. In the novel, the segments of these workers are portrayed with the characters who labor on the ranch. From Slim, the princely jerkline skinner, to Candy, the aging swamper who is simply waiting for his turn to be put out to die, to Crooks, the representative minority figure who has the least privileged position of all, all characters are exploited by a hand that is constantly controlling them through intimidation and abuse.

In Of Mice and Men's micro-scaled farming situation, Steinbeck sets up a representation of the victimizing system that was in place for all California field workers during the 1930s. In doing so, he uses the novel as a representative depiction of the events that were taking place at the time. These abused field laborers, affected by an economic depression, had their situations further exasperated by a system of management that took advantage of their surplus. In this system, "few workers anywhere in America were laboring under conditions as materially unrewarding, as physically arduous, or as psychologically oppressive as were those employed on California's industrialized farms" (Daniel 103).
Steinbeck uses this setting to depict the struggles of the migrant labor force in California in *Of Mice and Men*. He shows workers like Candy and Crooks who have been victims of this farming system their whole live in order to portray George and Lennie as one unified split-hero. George and Lennie are able to give these characters a glimpse of a better life with the simplistic dream they share of owning their own piece of property and “living off the fatta the lan’.” When taken in the context of the representative stance of the novel, this dream takes on new significance.

6 Though the dream shared by these characters is argued by some to be simply a symbolic Eden that is a direct reaction to the physical conditions imposed by capitalistic practices, when looked at in a closer light, we find that the dream is truly “an expression of the desire for self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency” that is lacking from the work cycle that is imposed on these field workers (Marsden 294).
CHAPTER THREE

HEROES AND SYMBOLS

The Dream of Heroes

In the novel, George and Lennie meet a variety of other workers stuck in a system, which causes them to be transformed into the "loneliest guys in the world" (15). If we consider the novel as more than simply a morality tale, we can find socially related themes and discourses surrounding the loneliness and struggle all migrant workers of the era. These themes and discourses are strikingly similar to those found in The Grapes of Wrath and In Dubious Battle and allow us to view Of Mice and Men as more of a tale exploring social injustice. In this historical reading, George and Lennie's struggles parallel many of the struggles of the migrant workers and their communist leaders in the 1930s as Steinbeck viewed them; much like George and Lennie encourage the most destitute of characters to save for and dream of a better life, the men and women striking for higher wages and better living conditions were encouraging their fellow workers to strike, picket, and fight for a higher standard of living.

George's levelheaded idealism and dream of property ownership parallels the discontented farm workers', and
Lennie’s overindulgent short-sightedness and uncontrolled strength reflect the ideologies of the fiery communist leadership of those who united the workers under the banner of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union. This reading can help us see how these characters’ representative goals clashed. We will first explore the juxtaposition of these men and the camps of laborers for which they stand; we will note how the dream differed for each and will discover through this juxtaposition how Steinbeck viewed the striking migrants’ union as also divided. This union’s dreams and actions, as in the case of the split hero, result in one half of the movement dying.

George Milton: Militant Farmer

As noted in Chapter Two, the volatile combination of farmworker militancy and radical leadership of the 1930s that grew out of the constant oppression of California’s migrant workers produced “one of the most turbulent and eventful chapters in the history of agricultural unionism” (Daniel 109). In Of Mice and Men, George exhibits many of the traits of the farmworker half of this movement. The very name George is derived “from the Greek name Gerogios which was derived from the Greek word georgos meaning
'farmer, earthworker'” (Campbell). George, like the displaced Dust Bowl farmers, comes to the ranch in order to make money so that he can invest in a home of his own. Also like these farmers, George is a migrant, wandering from place to place in search of employment.

It is perhaps the dream that George creates and envisions however that draws the most compelling link between him and the migrant farmers of the 1930s. Steinbeck notes in “Dubious Battle in California” how these farmers wanted to gain land and settle on it (America and Americans 73). These Americans were, like George, lured by the prospect of capital and individual freedom. Unfortunately, these notions directly conflicted with the capitalistic practices of the industrialized farms; these were only interested in moving migratory labor from one crop to the next and in getting migratory workers out of their farms at the end of the season (McWilliams 192).

Unlike Lennie, whose dream consists of only the pastoral notion of tending rabbits, George’s dream is that of being his own boss and getting out of the hopeless cycle of work without reward. George’s vision is steeped in capital and is, according to literary critic John Marsden, “a reaction to alienation, which is classically
the consequence of the separation of labor from the full process of production" (295). For George, the notion of land ownership reflects a longing to belong in a place where no system can tell him that he must move. He states in Chapter Three, "We’d jus’ live there. We’d belong there" (56). For George, his gaining a home would spell an end to isolation.

Also, when George speaks of the dream, he tells Candy that instead of having to buck barley for eleven hours a day, they would only have to tend their own crops seven; if they want to take time off to attend a circus or a carnival, they would not need to clear it with any boss; they would simply "go to her" (59). With this independence, George also finds a connection with those whom he would be living with. For George, the dream of property ownership not only means acquiring capital (a home), but also gaining freedom from the strains of an isolating capitalistic system gone awry.

The dream George creates is perhaps that of every American. Steinbeck noted in his article, "America and Americans: Paradox and Dream," that "the home dream is only one of the deepest American illusions which, since they can’t be changed, function as cohesive principles to bind the nation together and make it different from all
the other nations” (America and Americans 335). We see from this article that while Steinbeck saw this dream as important, he also saw that it was made of a mythical quality and was not attainable for all. This notion of the unattainable American dream is further seen when Crooks tells Lennie:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches [...] with] the same damn thing in their heads [...] every damn one of ’em got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ’em ever gets it. (72)

Nonetheless, George, like these hundreds of others, continues to struggle for his goal of land ownership and continues to bring others into this dream.

One of these characters is Candy. When George ropes Candy into his dream, he is, in a sense, adopting a victim of industrial farming. Candy, with a missing hand, is in as precarious a situation as Lennie. According to literary critic Bert Cardullo, “to stress the similarity between Candy’s position and Lennie’s, Steinbeck has Candy, and no other character in the play, treat Lennie as his mental equal” (Cardullo 10). This parallel between Lennie’s helplessness and Candy’s is further illustrated by the fact that George never tells Candy about Lennie’s mental
condition as he does Slim. Candy, like Lennie, needs someone to look out for him, for once he has been fired, he "won't have no place to go, and [he] can't get no more jobs" (59).

For a reader viewing the novel in its symbolic stance, Candy represents Steinbeck's view of migrants like George who have become victims of the vicious isolation that the farm society imposes on its workers. Candy, like the other workers, has no family, nor does he have any one to take care of him in his twilight years. With no means of supporting himself, he comes to represent the migrants Steinbeck witnessed who were dispossessed, used, and discarded. These people, as soon as they picked the locals' crops, were run off the land and moved on with no connection to each other or any one else (In Dubious Battle 86). In George's vision of the dream, this isolation would end for Candy (as it would for Lennie and later Crooks), as he would be cared for by the home that he had purchased with the other workers.

Apart from his dream and all that it would entail for the despondent ranch workers, George's physical features also resemble the migrant half of the heroic farm movement. Chapter One describes George as small and quick (4). In opposition to the antagonist of the novel, Curley,
whose stature denotes smallness of character, George’s description does not hold this connotation. Whereas Curley hates men who are larger than himself and proves himself to be villainous with his cruel and overbearing personality, picking fights with other workers who are larger than he is to prove that he is tough, George gingerly travels with a giant. George, though he is small, takes no issue with his size, for it is a leviathan that keeps him from becoming “mean” (40). By describing George as small, Steinbeck is seemingly comparing his body size to that of the body of the Dustbowl migrants—small in power and number in the overall population of 1930’s California.

Steinbeck also describes George as being quick, which parallels his description of the migrant population who he describes as “courageous, intelligent, and resourceful” (America and Americans 73). George also exhibits these traits. From telling Lennie to hide if he gets into trouble to appeasing Curley for the sake of keeping his job at the ranch, George, like the workers migrating from the dustbowl, has a quick mind necessary for his and Lennie’s survival.

In addition, George is also “dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features” (4). In these
physical features, George's dark face resembles that of a farmer whose face has been darkened by years of labor under the sun. The word "features" in this passage indicates that Steinbeck is not only describing his face. Like the workers of the 1930s who "cannot be herded, attacked, starved, or frightened," George's sharp, strong features denote that he is also a man who cannot be treated as such (America and Americans 73). The facial features reflect a strong disposition and a tough mentality.

His restless eyes also resemble those of the displaced migrants of the Dust Bowl. Ever searching for a new life, their eyes shift from place to place looking for belonging and a bit of work to sustain them. Steinbeck describes this look in The Grapes of Wrath with:

And the migrants steamed in on the highway and their hunger was in their eyes, and their need was in their eyes. They had no argument, no system, nothing but their numbers and their needs. When there was work for a man, ten men fought for it--fought with a low wage. (312)

Like George, the Dust Bowl migrants came to California with "one fixed idea, [...] to acquire land and settle on it" (America and Americans 73). Like the refugee
migrants, George is one who clearly see that he is being exploited. He constantly looks for a way out and saves his money to buy a little piece of land and he too has nothing but his numbers and his needs on his mind; he frequently develops schemes to acquire land and make a living once he has bought it. He tells Candy in Chapter Three that they will raise pigs, catch fish, and can fruit to keep themselves alive (56). George, like the displaced farmers of the Dust Bowl, wants nothing more than to finally settle down and feel a sense of belonging.

Like the displaced migrants, George is a victim of chance. In the novel, George plays solitaire, a game that is played alone (which highlights his rootless alienation) and serves as a symbol of the type of world that is "one of chance, of reversals of fortune beyond man's comprehension or his power to control" (Shurgot 38). Like the migrant workers who have been displaced by a drought, George has been displaced by a system that has caused him to be without a family and a permanent place to live. As we have seen, he tells Slim in Chapter Three that he has no family and that Lennie is the only person that keeps him from becoming mean (40). George's game of solitaire connects him with the workers of California, for both are caught in an "unpredictable, often merciless world in
which [they] vainly strive to maintain their dignity and fulfill their dreams” (Shurgot 43). The exploitative labor system further exasperates these dreams and causes the workers to strive for a goal that will never be reached.

Lennie Small: Radical Leadership

When we consider George’s prominent resemblances to the striking farmers, we cannot leave out Lennie’s conspicuous resemblances to the radical communist leadership that was guiding these workers. The first thing that strikes us about Lennie is his name. Apart from the name meaning “brave lion,” “derived from the Germanic element leon ‘lion’ combined with hard ‘brave, hardy’,” the name alludes to Lenin, the Marxist theoretician who was leader of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and later the first premier of the Soviet Union (Campbell 1). By giving this character the name “Lennie,” it seems Steinbeck desires to have him evoke in a reader an unconscious association with the Russian leader and to stand for a doctrine that Steinbeck himself did not agree with; his own political philosophies were that of, according to biographer Jay Parini, a “standard New Deal democrat with a fierce admixture of western individualism and Yankee independence” (78).
While Steinbeck provides us with a clear and distinctive view of how he viewed the migrant workers through his writing of George, he does not provide such a clear portrait of how he views communism in his writing of Lennie, for his role is so ripe with contradictions. For instance, though he can do the work of ten men, he can do none it without George's direction. He is needed to make George's dream a reality, yet he is more trouble than he is worth. Another contradiction Lennie's character holds is that though he loves to pet soft, little animals and dreams of one day being able to tend rabbits (a role George has given him), he kills every small animal in his possession, thereby calling into question whether he would even ever be able to tend rabbits if given the task. It seems that the best way to come to understand how Steinbeck viewed communism is through looking closely at Lennie's contradictions and how these contradictions place him in the novel; in the light of these contradictions, we can gain a better understanding as to how Steinbeck viewed the oxymoron of American communism, particularly in the fields of California during the 1930s.

The first contradiction Lennie holds is that of his very character; though he should be a mean, lonely migrant, he is not. From the way George speaks about the
meanness of the migrants and the very rugged and lonely existence of the ranch workers, we see that Lennie’s character is definitely out of place. Whereas other workers become mean because they travel as lonely outsiders, Lennie seems to be unaffected by it. He is, for the most part, even-tempered and nice. Lennie’s mentality does not allow him to be able to feel loneliness, and his retardation allows him to be simplistically unaffected by the lifestyle in which he and George live. George states that he is “ [...] just like a kid. There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither” (43). The only place that Lennie really shows any sort of meanness is when others are being harmed. Unlike the other men who become forlorn by their own situations, Lennie only becomes “mean” when it comes to others’ situations. One such instance is when he and George are talking about the dream and George tells him that he will be having to make sure that no cats get to the rabbits, to which Lennie responds that he will break their “God damn necks” if they try to get the rabbits (57). Another time when he gets mean is when he stands in Crooks’ room and the stable buck asks him what will happen if George gets hurt; he gets angry and begins to approach the stable buck in a dangerous manner because Crooks implies that someone has hurt George. Even when
Crooks tells him that if something happens to George that he (Lennie) will be placed into a booby hatch and “they’ll tie [him] up with a collar, like a dog” (70), Lennie does not become irate because of what will happen to himself, but for what he thinks has happened to George, as evident by his angry response of, “What happened to George?” (70).

This lack of selfish anger and the innocence that results seems to alienate Lennie from the other workers. We do not see Lennie playing horseshoes with them, and apart from the most destitute characters who are longing for acceptance and friendship from seemingly anyone who will give it, the regular migrants do not seek him for companionship. Though George gains companionship in Lennie, it seems to be only in the terms of a parent/child relationship that George cares for Lennie’s needs. This, as we have seen, cures George’s loneliness and gives him somebody who never allows him to forget his dream of a better life. Though George tolerates Lennie’s simplicity because he feels a sense of duty to do such (40), it seems that Lennie is so unlike the other workers in terms of his meanness that they cannot associate with him on any level.

When the other men go to Old Suzy’s to drink, socialize, and “blow their jack,” nobody invites Lennie. On the same note, when the men are out playing horseshoes
or are in the bunkhouse talking, Lennie is also not involved; he is typically out with his puppy. It is as if his mentality causes him to be a permanent outsider who will never fit in. Lennie’s alienation seems to be Steinbeck’s reflection of the same type of alienation that the communist leaders faced in light of their position on the farms and seems to enforce the notion of the communists being a part of the migrant population, yet not fully a part.

It seems that Steinbeck viewed the communist leaders of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union as out of place because of the selfless anger they too conveyed. This loss of meanness is depicted at the beginning of *In Dubious Battle*, when Jim has turned in his application to the communist party and is being interviewed by the party’s recruiter, Harry Nilson. When Jim tells Harry that he has nothing to lose by joining the party, Harry tells him, “nothing except hatred [...] you’re going to be surprised when you see that you stop hating people” (18). In this response we see the loss of meanness that Steinbeck seems to have perceived people gaining when they joined a party that was devoted to helping others; incidentally, Jim does become a happier person as the novel progresses. This simplicity is what
seems to have been also written into Lennie’s character as he selflessly helps others and becomes angry when powerful men try to hurt them.

According to historian Cletus Daniel, the responsibility of American communism was to teach workers the fallacy of the partnership between labor and capital, and “arouse the farmworkers to militant words and actions, and thus to radicalize their behavior” (Daniel 141). In *In Dubious Battle*, their purpose is summed up with the words of the union’s leader Mac when he states that he needs to teach the workers “how much capital thinks of ‘em, and how quick capital would poison ‘em like a bunch of ants” (327). In *In Dubious Battle* the communist organizers are also outsiders who never truly fit in with the other workers. They are leaders from the East who approach apple pickers like the Mr. Dakin and Mr.Anderson, subtly trying to persuade them to join their union. Most of the men do reject them because they wish to preserve themselves by not being associated with collective actions that would place them into the category of “radical”. Daking tells Mac and Jim that though he has nothing against radicals, he does not wish to do time for “no kind of outfit,” because he has a wife and family to support, and they are more important than the other workers. While the
communists in *In Dubious Battle* resemble Lennie in that they are a selfless group working tirelessly to fight for the cause of the migrants' organization, they do not resemble Lennie in their roles as outsiders. How then can we account for this apparent inconsistency in light of Steinbeck's works? For the answer to this, we must look to *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the radicals' ostracizing anger is also seen; however, it only serves as a backdrop to the struggles of the migrating Joads. As the Joads are driving up to the Hooper camp to pick peaches, they see hordes of men and women standing outside the gates, raising their fits and yelling at their truck as it enters. As the theme of "selfless anger" is written into Lennie's character in *Of Mice and Men*, in *The Grapes of Wrath* this type of anger is also written into the group of men and women that stands outside of the camps' gates in a mixture of angry protest, warning to the Joads of the imminent price cut they will eventually encounter. Like Lennie, who becomes angry at the thought of someone hurting George, these men and women become angry at the thought of the peach growers hurting another group of migrants coming into the camp to make five cents and who will eventually have this price cut to two-and-a-half
cents. What ties these radical protesters to Lennie even more than their anger, however, is the fact that, as Tom notes while driving up to the ranch, they are the Joads’ own people (406).

While historians like Carey McWilliams and Cletus Daniel typically depict the radical leaders as not being migrants, Steinbeck, it seems, viewed some as being, like the preacher turned radical, Casey, in The Grapes of Wrath, migrants workers themselves. When Tom notes that these people are his own, at first it disturbs him; however, later, when he runs into Casey and learns why he has become a radical outsider, Tom develops a level of acceptance. This acceptance eventually causes Tom to be labeled as radical himself when he kills the vigilante who has murdered Casey and must leave his family for a life on the run. Unlike the radical leaders in In Dubious Battle who are outsiders that have come in to help with the striking migrants’ cause, Lennie as a symbol of communism resembles the excluded communist of The Grapes of Wrath who are of the same breed as the migrant workers, yet who are, like Lennie, outsiders because of their mentality.

The next parallel we see between Lennie and communism is in terms of the other characters’ need for him. As seen previously, though George needs Lennie for his dream to
become a reality, he is constantly telling him how he could get along so well without him. We can read this contradiction in light of how Steinbeck viewed communism and its role as the workers’ last resort. It seems to be Stienbeck’s opinion that though communism was great for the work it did for the workers, like Lennie, it seems to also have been dangerous because of the negative light that the larger segment of society held in regards to it.

As seen in both In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath, the radical communists are a threat to the larger segment of society for they are attempting to spell the end to capitalistic order. In In Dubious Battle those characters who are associated with communism are constantly being harassed and humiliated; this is seen most poignantly as Al, the restaurant owner, has his lunch cart burned to the ground for simply giving the communist leaders a free meal. In The Grapes of Wrath, the trouble that can be brought on the workers for associating with communism is seen when the security officers of Hooper’s Ranch stop and harass Tom for wandering around. They warn him to turn back or else the “crazy pickets” might get him (420). Later, we see the ultimate response given to communism as Casey has his head bashed in with a shovel.
for being a leader and Tom takes revenge, thus causing himself to also be labeled as such.

In California’s political arena in the 1930s, the threat of communism spelling the end of order was quite great. A commentary found in a 1933 issue of the progressive newspaper, Nation, read:

Americans are slow to understand that actual revolution already exists in the farm belt [...] if revolution starts in the United States, it is precisely in such a group that it is likely to take shape. (3)

By riling farmers to action, the work of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union was not only attempting to fight for migrant issues, but to also alter a system of farming that was in place for over a century. This view of the hidden nature of American communism is written into Of Mice and Men, for just as Lennie tries to keep George’s dream of independence and his place in it hidden from the rest of the ranch workers, the union tried to keep its ideologies from the view of the public in California to avoid the repercussions that could result (Daniel 24-25).
According to historian Cletus Daniel, to avoid the larger segment of society’s backlash, these radical leaders:

  tended to follow a rather passive organizational strategy [...] leaders sought to advance the union’s fortunes [...] that were provoked by steadily declining wages and deteriorating working conditions (Daniel 127).

The communist movement’s hidden quality seems to be written into Lennie’s character as Steinbeck describes him as having a “shapeless face” (4). We also note that George tells Lennie to keep quiet and not speak to characters like the boss and Curley about the dream. This hidden aspect of the dream can be read as the way Steinbeck saw the migrant workers telling their communist leaders to keep silent about communism’s place in their dream of equitable treatment.

As previously described, if these communist sympathizers were discovered, they would be subjected to torments like being tarred and feathered, beaten, and publicly humiliated. Perhaps this is the reason why Steinbeck writes George as telling Lennie to also be quiet about his own dream; if it was uncovered, perhaps he would also have been humiliated and psychologically beaten by
the ranch's larger, "mean" society. The Associated Farmers enacted these tactics to develop a "statewide anticommunist propaganda campaign to arouse public feeling against the union" (Daniel 252). These strategies were successful in crushing the unionizing efforts, for the communists were eventually expelled from California; with this we gain an understanding as to why Steinbeck would write a symbol of the movement as not only having an indistinguishable face, but a role in the story that is needed, yet unfeasible.

Though these links between Lennie's inherent contradictions and communism are compelling, perhaps the most interesting connection is that of Lennie's version of the dream. Unlike George, whose dream possesses rationality and present-mindedness resembling the farmers', Lennie's dream centers on an idealized view of tending and protecting rabbits. This aspect of Lennie's place is important in the dream motif, for George is its creator, and as the creator, places Lennie as he sees fit: rabbit tender. This may lead a reader to ask what rabbits have to do with communism in America.

To answer this question, we first need to explore the nature of rabbits. When we ponder rabbits, we find two main traits: first, they are not complex creatures, and
second, they are weak and are creatures of prey. When we think of soft, furry rabbits, the first thing we note is how basic they really are. Unlike other creatures that need certain amounts of sunlight, special food, and/or complex mating rituals to reproduce, all rabbits need is the freedom to wander and a meager amount of vegetation on which they can feed. Looking at the novel’s representative stance, when we compare Lennie’s rabbit vision with the version of the dream that was held by the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union, we gain a better understanding of Steinbeck’s vision of the radical leadership’s own political goals.

According to historians Patrick H. Mooney and Theo Majka, the dream of the Communist leadership of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union entailed:

A basic wage of $2.50 for an eight-hour day with time and a half for overtime, union recognition, preferential hiring through the union as an intermediary, election of rank-and-file worker committees to negotiate with employers, and hiring without discrimination according to race, color, union affiliation, or strike participation. (128)
These "radical" goals, are really not radical at all, but are, like rabbits, quite basic. Goals like a basic wage, hiring through a union, hiring without discrimination, and pay for overtime are, by our modern standards, quite fundamental and should be able to thrive alone. However, as we have seen, they were not perceived as such by the system of industrialized farming in the 1930s and were preyed upon for the sake of profit. Because of this, they needed a protector; in the case of the novel this was Lennie; in the real world politics of the era, this was communism.

Surely, with Lennie's strength, it would be more suitable to place him with a more responsible job like hoeing fields, but Steinbeck does not write this as Lennie's place on the future farm. Instead, George places Lennie with the role of rabbit tender to appease him and give him a job that will allow him to indulge his love of soft things. This role, however, is problematic in itself, for surely George must know from experience that because Lennie is such a "crazy bastard", he will kill any rabbit he comes in contact with. If George has seen the way Lennie kills mice and puppies and violently latches on to the fabric of women's dresses, why would Steinbeck then
write him as giving Lennie a job that he would never be able to do?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that it seems George does not truly want Lennie to have a place in his dream. The dream that George give Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* is simply too idealistic and impractical to work. It is impractical because rabbits are not creatures that really need to be tended, and though they usually need to be guarded from such predators as cats, they typically do not need one person with the sole responsibility of doing it (who ever heard of a rabbit shepherd or a rabbit rancher?). Likewise, the dream is idealistic because even if rabbits needed a tender, because of his mentality, Lennie would not be the man for the job due to the fact that every single rabbit would probably be crushed in a manner of days.

With this said, in a literal sense, it is peculiar that Steinbeck would write George as having given Lennie such a role; however, in a symbolic picture of the fields of California, Lennie’s role seems to fall perfectly in line with Steinbeck’s understanding of communism’s place in America. It seems that Steinbeck viewed the communist leaders of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union as being given a role that should have
never been needed. As Steinbeck wrote in "Starvation Under the Orange Trees," "No One complains of the necessity of feeding the horse when he is not working. But we complain about feeding the men and women who work our lands" (America and Americans 87). In this pondering, we see the desperation that Steinbeck witnessed as he saw these basic rights having been preyed upon and killed by the larger growers and the migrants having no other place to look to get them back than communism. As noted previously, most migrants did not align themselves with core communist ideology, nor did they wish to have a radical proletariat revolution. All they wanted were their basic rights, and when they could not achieve them by their own means, they looked to communism. As George uses Lennie and manipulates him with a place in his future dream, so can it be read that Steinbeck viewed the migrants as using and manipulating their communist leaders to achieve their own dream of permanence and fair treatment.

Besides being idealistic, the role of communism in America to Steinbeck was impractical. Just as George probably knows that Lennie would not ever be able to tend rabbits because of a mentality that causes him to latch on to and not let go of things, so can it be read that Steinbeck saw the desperate migrants as giving communism a
place in their dream. Steinbeck biographer, Jay Parini, reported that Steinbeck relented communism because it was “deeply anti-individualist and contradicted his fundamental belief in the self as the origin of all human action and the seat of conscience and morality” (359). In both The Grapes of Wrath and In Dubious Battle when the migrant workers join the communist leaders, they do so out of necessity. Communism was not an ideology that Steinbeck seemed to want to endorse, rather, it seems to be something he wanted to portray. Just as it would have been unpractical to have Lennie tending rabbits he would eventually kill, so would it have been, in Steinbeck’s estimation, a blunder to have a group with an ideology discouraging individuality permanently controlling workers’ individual needs.

Therefore, when Lennie speaks of the future rabbits he will tend, the context of the dream itself comes into play and sheds light on Steinbeck’s understanding of the place of communism in California; though the communists do play a role in attaining the dream of the farm workers’ future unionization, it is not they who have constructed the dream with their own permanence. They are, as Steinbeck views them, simply an organization to be used to achieve the dream; however, they have no real place in the
dream once it has been actualized. It seems that Lennie is given such an unrealistic and impractical place to show the unrealistic and impractical place of communism in America.

The Union of Heroes

If Of Mice and Men is a cultural object that was born from Steinbeck's viewing California during the 1930s, it is not only the characters of George and Lennie who bring to light Steinbeck's understanding of the situation, but the union between them as well. For instance, one of the traits that ties George's identity to that of the striking field workers is the distrust he receives as the result of his association with Lennie. When the other ranch workers see him traveling with Lennie, they inquire why he does so; he replies that without Lennie he would become lonely and unkind. Unlike the other workers however, in Chapter Two, when the boss sees that George and Lennie are traveling together, he assumes their bond is sinister.

The boss tells George not to try to put anything regarding his and Lennie's relationship over him, for he has seen wise guys before and he will be able to "get away with nothing" (23). If we consider George as Steinbeck's representation of the migrant farm workers and Lennie his
representation of the Cannery and Agricultural Industrial Workers' Union, it becomes apparent why the boss would then be written as not trusting the two together; he assumes that together, not only are they defying the isolation clause, which states that the workers had to work and then move on, thereby making them the "loneliest guys in the world" (15), but he knows they have the potential of threatening his power and influencing other workers. As the story unfolds, his assumptions prove correct.

It seems that Steinbeck writes George and Lennie's union as influencing the other workers in the novel to intentionally show the unification of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union influencing the majority of migrant workers in California to fight for their rights, and thereby causing distrust. According to Historian Theo Majka, this union was "effective in escalating defiance and providing tactical expertise and leadership, and it was extraordinarily successful in winning grower concessions" (84). This type of distrust is also illustrated in The Grapes of Wrath when in Chapter Twenty-Four the government camp dance that Tom attends is interrupted by a group of deputies attempting to stage a riot so that they can have the gathering stopped. When the
men who were to stage the riot are found out, stopped, and escorted out, Pa comments how “they’s change a-comin. [...] They’s a res’less feelin’. Fella can’t figger nothin’ out, he’s so nervous” (381).

In the historical setting of California, this change would occur as men and women unionized and were suppressed with the brutal force of vigilantes and negative media attention formed by local growers. Strikes like those of cotton pickers in 1933 and vegetable harvesters in 1934 proved that when migrant workers allowed themselves to be led by communists, they had the power to make their voices heard, thereby causing wage increases and better living conditions (Majka 85). In Of Mice and Men, the change happens when George tells Candy in Chapter Three that he will become a part of his and Lennie’s plans of purchasing a home. The moment that George includes Candy in his and Lennie’s dream, he fulfills the boss’s prophecy and has turned into a “wise guy.” Through his inclusion into the dream, Candy is changed into a bolder man, able to taunt Curley (61) and his wife (76), and the union of George and Lennie has increased by one person.

When we consider the roles of George and Lennie in light of the cultural movement they portray, we see that the concept of the leadership role can prove to be
problematic, for in the novel, George (the emblematic strikers) is the character who controls Lennie (the emblematic leadership). How then do we account for this seeming inconsistency in light of Steinbeck’s representative vision of Central California in the 1930s?

To answer this question, we must first look at the relationship held between the striking farmers and the Cannery and Agricultural Industrial Workers' Union. Like Lennie’s last name suggests, in the overall picture of the movement, the union’s place was small. Though the union organized workers, without the causes of the striking workers, it would never have had an opportunity to make itself and its own causes known. While it is valid to state that these communists came to California’s fields to provide “forceful leadership,” without the striking migrants and their needs, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union would never have been needed. Therefore, in terms of Steinbeck’s understanding of the situation, it was really the migrant workers who were controlling their communist leaders in doing such things as representing them to the growers associations and labor exchanges. According to historian William Z. Foster’s *History of the Communist Party in the United States*: 

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In the *Communist Manifesto* [...] Marx stated that the Communists fight for immediate demands in alliance with groups, classes, and parties which do not accept the long-range goals of socialism [...] the goal was] in fact, the organization of the nation to save itself from the disastrous betrayal by the capitalist.

(322-324)

One of the most important jobs of American communism had was that of creating a broad alliance with other workers. They did this through enticing them with an idealistic dream of a better life. In the symbolic aspect of the novel, Lennie does just this as he entices Candy, the most despondent worker of the ranch, with his own idealistic dream. After Lennie has crushed Curley’s hand in Chapter Three, Candy overhears Lennie asking George how long it will be before they will “get that little place an’ live on the fatta the lan’—and rabbits” (55). George replies that he does not know. From this point on, Lennie asks George to tell about the future farm, and George goes on with his story in vivid detail.

After George has told the story and is sitting entranced by his own picture, Candy questions whether George knows a place, and then agrees to pitch in money
and become partners in owning the land. This scene draws a parallel between Lennie and the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union for it not only shows Lennie luring Candy with a simple request to hear about his idealistic dream, but also marks the beginning of Lennie leading Candy with this picture.

As the novel progresses, we note that Candy's dream resembles Lennie's much more than it does George's. He very much sounds like Lennie when he tells Crooks, "We gonna have a dog an' rabbits an' chickens. We're gonna have green corn an' maybe a cow or a goat" (74). If we consider Candy as Steinbeck's representation of those field workers in the 1930s who would be most enticed by the communistic lure, we see these workers' dreams becoming, in Steinbeck's opinion, more idealistic. Though the dream in the novel is not idealistic in the sense that it involves people fighting for equal pay and/or preferential hiring, it is radical in that it involves the acceptance of society's outcasts (Lennie and Curley) and in that it seeks to give these outcasts a decent life.

Candy, being the most despondent of these outcasts, is the only character of the novel who sees Lennie's place in the dream as real. This is evident when he tells Lennie, "I got it figured out. We can make some money on
them rabbits if we go about it right" (74). Candy seems to draw happiness from the prospect of Lennie’s place and even finds a way to incorporate it into a capitalistic system. This seems to be a depiction of Steinbeck’s perception of these workers’ beliefs about communism and the hope it could bring them in their hopeless situation. In Candy’s vision of a unity between George and Lennie’s dream, we can further see the migrant workers’ desperation. They came to believe that communism was something that could work in America and could even be made into a capitalistic enterprise, fighting for the rights of workers for the benefit of workers (as would selling Lennie’s rabbits do for George and himself).

Though it can be argued that George is actually the alliance maker in this situation, in that he is the character who has the decision of whether or not anybody will be included in the scheme. Without the inadvertent action of Lennie slipping and asking him to tell him about the rabbits in Candy’s presence, Candy would never have been lured into the prospect of a better life. Therefore, he would have never been empowered with the ability to taunt Curley and his wife in the latter part of the novel. This implies that, as Steinbeck saw the historical situation, these migrant workers would never have had the
courage to stand on their own against the growing associations that were oppressing them.

As Lennie attracts the most despondent characters into the dream, historian Cletus Daniel shows the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union doing the same:

If communists distant from the fields and orchards of California misunderstood or chose to ignore the true nature of the CAWIU's appeal, those party members who actually carried out the difficult work of organizing agricultural labor did not. The CAWIU's power to attract members in 1933 existed in exact proportion to its organizers success in convincing farmworkers that the union could assist them in bettering wages, working conditions, and standard of living. (142)

If we view the events of the novel in relation to those of the historical period in question, we see that Steinbeck viewed the place of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union as necessary but minimal. Like George, who views Lennie as a hard worker whose money is needed to purchase their future home, yet nothing but trouble (12), the despondent farmers viewed the Union as a
necessary yet irritating piece to their plans of a better life. According to historian Cletus Daniel:

For the vast majority of California farmworkers who joined the union [...], membership signified neither an understanding nor an endorsement of communism; it seems to have meant only that they accepted the idea of collective action as the most promising means of solving the economic problems which oppressed agricultural workers in the state. (142)

Without their grating communist leaders, however, the migrants would never have made the temporary gains they did. From the beginning of the novel to the end, George's frustration with Lennie makes itself apparent. At the beginning of the novel, when Lennie requests ketchup with his can of beans, George exclaims, "Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. [...] whatta I got? [...] I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get" (12).

Before this ketchup incident, George tells Lennie how he could get along so nicely if he didn't have him on his tail (8-9), and later in the novel, George tells Slim how Lennie isn't mean, but because he is so dumb, he gets into trouble. This seems to reflect the migrants' troubles as
they would also lose their jobs for being labeled as “radical” because of their own associations with communism.

In Steinbeck’s discourse concerning this turbulent era, the communist leadership always takes a secondary place to the causes of the striking farmers and seems to simply be a part of the migrant workers’ “defensive fury.” In “Dubious Battle in California,” Steinbeck related that, to the picketing farmer as well as to the growers, the communist had simply become a “guy that wants twenty-five cents an hour when [the grower] was only paying twenty” (America and Americans 76). In the fictional In Dubious Battle, which deals with the strikes from these communists’ viewpoint, their cause is painted in light of how the workers can use them. They do not desire an overthrowing of the whole industrial farming system, but rather, desire the workers’ understanding of how they can use the organization to right their injustice. Jim, the burgeoning union leader of the novel, states at the end of the book, “I wanted to be used” (280). This single statement seems to be a summary of the union leadership and lends insight into the place they held in the migrant workers’ struggles and the place they held in their dreams.
As previously discussed, these struggles were in reaction to declining wages and living conditions. According to historians Linda and Theo Majka's, *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and The State*, "rural strikes took no subordinate place in California at the time, and many observers described them as class warfare in the fields" (75). In the late 1920s, these strikes got little help from such organizations as the American Federation of Labor, so turned to the radical leadership of the communist Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union to develop techniques for organizing and striking. As previously stated, "The years 1930-32 witnessed ten major strikes in California agriculture, with three involving more than a thousand workers [...] The CAWIU participated in all the larger strikes" (Majka 75).

Though the combined efforts of the migrant workers and the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union do lead to marked gains for workers, they resemble the short-lived gains Lennie and George make while working together in the novel. This gives us an indication as to why Steinbeck does not write George and Lennie as one single Dark Rider character who comes in and rescues the ranch with his dream of a better life; to do so would have denied the novel's cultural undertones and would have
underplayed the representational qualities that George and Lennie hold, for as Lennie ends up ruining the image of the split hero in the novel, the radical tendencies of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union end up ruining the image of the split heroic movement of California. And just as the union of George and Lennie never leads to any permanent gains for the men on the ranch, the union of the migrant population and their communist leaders never truly leads to any permanent gains for any of the other migrants of California. For this, Steinbeck ends his novel with the disheartening image of this split-heroic role being permanently broken and the dream of a better life expiring for George, Candy, and Lennie.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE DEATH OF A DREAM

Division and Accomplishments

If George and Lennie were an actual Dark Rider hero in a dime novel, we would find this character in constant conflict. His mind (George) would be yearning to rescue the ranch with a dream of land ownership while his heart (Lennie) would be longing for a more idealistic vision. Though this hero would be strong and pure of heart, his ultimate destiny would be one of failure and eventual death for himself and his conflicted dream. This death would not only be the result of his sense of conflict, but, more importantly, his weakening in light of the powerful villain he was fighting.

In George and Lennie’s divided role, we find many of the conflicts that surround the American pulp hero. As any hero, George and Lennie cannot, in the words of critic Theodore L. Gross, “avoid the central conflict between human possibility and institutional power;” they present us with questions as: “How does one carve out a life of self regard in the face of collective power and authority?” and “How can one care about private idealism when public authority becomes overwhelming?” (Gross 193).
These questions become important as we view their place on the work ranch and how Lennie is killed.

Steinbeck’s picture of a doomed split Dark Rider hero gives us a glimpse of the failed union between capitalism and communism in 1930’s California. George, representing the mind and the migrant farmer half of the movement, wants to end the loneliness that engulfs his migratory life. Lennie, the representative communist heart of the union, desires a dream that places him with importance. Because Lennie’s dream, much like Lennie himself, has no real place in either George’s future plans or in the circumstances of the novel, he, like the communist leadership of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union, is killed.

Lennie is a mentally challenged giant. His uncontrollable strength mixes with his childlike obsession for soft things and presents George with a variety of problems. George tells Lennie:

If I was alone I could live so easy [...] an’ whatta I got, I got you! You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get. Jus’ keep me shovin’ all over the country all the time. An’ that ain’t the worst. You get in trouble [...] You keep me in hot water all the time. (12)
When we listen to George’s complaints, we note that he does not complain about having to feed Lennie, nor does he complain about having to take care of him. George’s frustrations center on the fact that Lennie does not, and can not, fit into the world in which he lives. Lennie, by no fault of his own, is an outcast. In this outcast quality, we see one of the reasons he is killed. Being so unlike the other characters who conform to their roles of mean, lonely migrants, Lennie cannot blend in. In this, we can see the way Steinbeck possibly viewed the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union also being killed for its outsider quality and its inability to fit into the mainstream of 1930’s California because of its selfless anger and willingness to fight for causes that were not its own.

Lennie is also killed because he brings trouble to the settings into which he is placed. As we have seen, though Lennie can do the work of ten men, his strength puts him at a disadvantage for he cannot control it. His compulsion for silky things causes him to kill every small animal that is in his possession (i.e. the mouse and puppy). This compulsion makes him latch on to the woman’s dress in Weed at the beginning of the novel, thereby causing his and George’s exile from that ranch. When
Lennie feels something soft his instinct is to hold on, squeeze tight, and not let go; he cannot realize the results of his deeds.

It seems that Lennie’s main problem is his inability to foresee or to understand the consequences of his actions. From the way he kills the mouse at the beginning of the novel to the way he kills Curley’s wife at the end, his childlike reactions indicate no ability to feel remorse or comprehend consequences. For example, when he kills the puppy at the end of the novel, all he can do is look at the corpse and ask it, “Why do you got to get killed? You ain’t so little as mice” (83). In this reaction, we see Lennie’s underdeveloped understanding of effect, even in light of a living creature’s death. Lennie’s limitations can be read as a representation of Steinbeck’s view of communist ideology. In one article he describes communists as being:

about as revolutionary as the Daughters of the American Revolution. Having established their coup and established their empire[s], revolution is their nightmare. They have had to hunt down and eliminate everyone with the slightest revolutionary tendency, even those who helped accomplish their own. (America and Americans 89)
To Steinbeck, communist revolution in California, as in any place in America, was, like Lennie, greatly flawed in that those involved with this type of revolution could also not see the consequences of their revolutionary actions; however, because of the capitalistic oppression they faced, they apparently had no other place to turn. In rallying people to revolt against this malevolent system, those who aligned themselves with communism were actually ushering in a regime that was more oppressive than before.

Though Lennie’s mentality, in part, causes the death of the dream, this failure is only shown to portray the efforts of the migrant workers seeking hope in the institute of American communism. And though Lennie does not fulfill his role as rabbit tender, he makes a great accomplishment--he gives the other characters hope for a better life. Like Lennie’s function, the function of unionization under communism was necessary in the promotion of a dream of a better life for migrant workers, despite their race and social standing. In the novel the only characters besides George who really associate with Lennie on a friendly level are those who are as dispossessed as he. Characters like Candy and Crooks are attracted to Lennie for they know that he will not judge what they say or tell anybody about their discontent with
the system. Candy discovers in Lennie a friend that he can treat as a mental equal. When he is talking to Lennie about the future place they will own, Candy tells Lennie how he has figured out a way to sell the rabbits (74).

Also, whereas George tends to treat Lennie’s place on the ranch as a fiction, Candy sees it as being real and assured. This seems to imply that Steinbeck viewed the future place of the communists as also assured in the minds of the most destitute field workers’ minds. To these workers, communism was a system that could be used to curtail the abuses of capitalism and make it a better, more sellable system by protecting the basic needs of workers in much the same way that Lennie would be protecting the rabbits in the dream sequence. Basic needs like a minimum wage of $2.50 for and eight hour day and hiring through a union seem to, in Steinbeck’s opinion, have needed protection and tending by someone, since the system of industrialized farming had provided that they would not survive on their own. Lennie’s assurance in the future dream sequence of the novel seems to reflect the hope that these destitute characters, as well as those they represent, have in anybody who could get them out of the situation into which capitalism had placed them.
A fictional depiction of this desperate attitude is seen in *In Dubious Battle* when Al, a despondent restaurant owner who freely feeds the communist leaders, is beaten and has his restaurant burned to the ground. He tells the communist leaders:

I can't get those guys outa my head—my little wagon all burned up, an' them jumpin' on me with their feet; and two cops down on the corner watchin', and not doin' a thing [...] I want to be against 'em [...] I want to be on the other side (204).

This wanting to be on the "other side" parallels Candy's attitude in *Of Mice and Men*. In being so disgusted with the system that is about to dispossess him, he is left to ponder the only hope he has left—joining Lennie and George in their prospective dream.

Like Candy, Crooks also finds in Lennie a confidant, for Lennie does not judge him on the basis of his skin color. He talks to Lennie in Chapter Four about his history and how he is discriminated against on the ranch. He is able to do this because "a guy can talk to [Lennie] an' be sure [he] won't go blabbin'" (69). The brief bond between Crooks and Lennie is established because Lennie will not leave his room and insists on talking to him.
When Lennie enters, Crooks objects at first, but is then forced into a conversation with the giant when he will not leave. This reflects Steinbeck’s view of the relationship between the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union and minority workers who, when being discriminated against and pushed aside by the power structure, also began freely talking. Steinbeck’s metaphoric comparison show the alliance of the communists and those workers who suffered discrimination. In Lennie not seeing Crooks’ skin color nor smelling the odor that the other men smell, Steinbeck symbolically depicts an ideology which cannot discriminate. Lennie’s mentality breaks down the boundaries that separate Crooks from the other workers; Steinbeck depicts how the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union did the same in its relation to the minority workers in 1930’s California.

The union challenged the status quo and accepted California’s outcasts. Minorities, foreigners, women, and people of all ages were drawn by the organization’s appeal (McWilliams 217). The communist ideology used to draw members from the field appealed to all downtrodden workers and accepted anybody who was oppressed. In the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union, Okies, Mexicans, and women were able to air their grievances and express
their desires for a better life, one in which they felt belonging and acceptance. The novel’s ranch society is extremely divided in a top-down structure, but Lennie does not acknowledge this structure for does he have the ability to see people’s social class; he accepts all ranch hands equally, and due to this, is truly the only character who has the strength to crush the hand of capitalistic oppression. This seems to be how Steinbeck saw the communist leaders’ ideologies as doing the same. These held to a radical notion that all people, regardless of gender, color, or social class, could fight to eventually improve their situation; this was used to draw people in and, for a time, inadvertently crush their oppressive system (McWiliams 227).

Whether they were ignorant of the union’s communist ideology not, those “communist” migrants and their leaders were, in Steinbeck’s opinion, involved with a system that was as dangerous as Lennie; the consequences of their actions could eventually result in the death of the goals for which they were so desperately fighting. Though the union’s migrant leadership was a powerful entity that was responsible for many gains given to the migrant workers, because they were communists (even if in name only), the larger segment of the population despised them. Newspapers
like the *LA Times* played on this disgust and enflamed it by publicly labeling the communist party as snakelike and something to be feared and loathed (McWilliams 227). This aspect of public disdain also contributed to the death of the dream of a better life.

The communists’ views of acceptance combined with the “red threat” and caused workers associated with the union to be portrayed in local newspapers as radicals and the rightful targets of vigilante violence (Mooney 130). In a time when communism threatened social stability, growers would take advantage of the public’s fear to justify their violence against communist attempts to organize labor. One Labor Bureau report stated:

> a group of growers have exploited a ‘communist’ hysteria for the advancement of their own interests [...] they have welcomed labor agitation, which they could brand as ‘Red,’ as a means of sustaining supremacy by mob rule.

(Mooney 131)

*Of Mice and Men* reflects this mob rule on a smaller scale as we see Curley rounds up a posse including George to kill Lennie at the end of the novel.

Eventually, Lennie’s strength and childlike passion results in the death of Curley’s wife, thereby causing
Lennie’s demise. This death portrays the death of a dream not only for George and Lennie, but for the other characters as well. The gains Lennie and George make while working together in the novel, like those made by the combined efforts of the displaced farmers and the leadership of the Cannery and Agricultural Industrial Workers’ Union, are short lived, for Lennie’s actions bring the power structure’s wrath upon himself and George. This seems to be Steinbeck’s depiction of the communist union’s radical tendencies ruining California’s split movement. For this reason the book’s pulp hero motif never truly pans out, and the novel ends with the role dismantling.

Of Curley’s Wife’s Death

While some critics have viewed Curley’s wife as only showing the loneliness of females living in an alienating world, when we look closely at Curley’s wife, we find that she is not an innocent woman who is simply an outsider; she is in fact a part of the ranch’s power structure and an intricate part of Curley’s intimidation of the ranch hands (Cerce 90). Being married to the novel’s villain, the wife is a nameless entity who is flashed in front of the workers as a representation of the family life they
will never be able to achieve. Unlike Ma in *The Grapes of Wrath* or Lisa in *In Dubious Battle*, who work to unite characters, Curley’s wife functions to separate the other characters and pit them against one another. She resembles Steinbeck’s temptress, Cathy, in *East of Eden* and the dark haired woman in *In Dubious Battle* who briefly takes Jim’s attention off the cause of the movement and makes him feel good with a smile that is cool, wise, and sure (307).

Curley’s wife is a vicious temptress. When she is introduced, she has full rouged lips and heavily made-up, wide spaced eyes. Her hair is perfectly done in “little rolled clusters” and she wears a cotton housedress and red mules, “the insteps of which [are] little bouquets of red ostrich feathers” (31). Her clothes and make up reflect carnality and she resembles the cathouse prostitutes rather than a despondently lonely woman who is trapped at home. George later comments, “She’s gonna make a messm [...] Ranch with a bunch of guys on it ain’t no place for a girl, specially like her” (51).

In this first picture of the wife she, like Lennie, is out of place. While Lennie is out of place for his large physique and his retardation, the wife is out of place for her seductive qualities and the trouble the men could get in by flirting with them; if they flirt, they
will incur Curley's wrath. When Whit is talking to George about Curley's wife in the third chapter of the book he tells him:

She ain't concealing nothing. I never seen nobody like her. She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody. I bet she even gives the stable buck the eye. I don't know what the hell she wants. (50)

The migrants despise and loath the wife not only for the trouble she can bring them, but also for the way she intimately knows of their situations and simply does not care. She tells Candy how she has seen too many of his kind who, "if (they) had two bits in the worl', why (they'd) be in gettin' two shots of corn with it and suckin' the bottom of the glass" instead of saving their money for a real home (77). She undermines the workers' dreams and views them as unattainable delusions. When she lumps the ranch workers with the other men she has seen, she is automatically telling them that they will never be able to make their dreams a reality. She ultimately does this for she is, in a representational reading of the novel, the ultimate American dream for which each and every worker in the context of the novel should strive.
We see in this respect that the wife, much like the great American dream, is something as seductive as it is unachievable. Though it can be argued that the wife is simply a lonely housewife seeking the attention of anybody who will give it to her, it is peculiar that she almost always appears after the men have been talking about their dreams. For instance, in her first appearance, Lennie has been telling George about his dream. She later appears when Lennie has been talking to Candy and Crooks about the dream; it seems almost as if she is a physical stand in for it.

When we view the wife as a stand in for the dream, we must ask ourselves what kind of dream she represents. When we view George’s dream narrative in its most detailed account, we note that he speaks of having chickens, cherries, apples, peaches, a windmill, and rabbits, but, interestingly, no women or family, as is the case of the typical American Dream (54). When we think of the typical American Dream, we think of a white picket fence, a married couple, and a few children, yet all of these elements are lacking from George’s sequence. In George’s dream, we see a transformation of the American dream into something that is almost communist in nature, for in his dream, marriage and family have been replaced with
comradeship in a context that very much resembles the bunkhouse he is trying to escape. George’s dream replaces the typical American Dream with that of a capitalistic dream of land ownership mixed with an almost communistic lure of equality, fairness, and freedom from top-down institutional oppression. George’s dream then seems to be a rejection of all the unnamed, illusive qualities Curley’s wife represents as the unattainable American dream.

When the wife is first introduced, she puts her hands behind her back and leans against a doorframe, “so that her body [is] thrown forward” as she asks George and Lennie if they are the new workers (30). By portraying the wife as having her hands behind her back, Steinbeck seems to show that not only is she powerless (in a sense having her hands tied behind her back), but that she is able to use this powerlessness to lure workers like George and Lennie, for it is with these powerless hands that she juts out her hips for the men to see. In this introduction, her stature is not that of a friendly woman trying to introduce herself, but rather a woman who is attempting to get attention with her body; it works, for Lennie’s eyes move down her torso. When Lennie comments to George how pretty she is, George makes the sarcastic remark, “Yeah,
and she’s sure hidin’ it” (32). George can see that this is not a desperate housewife, but is rather a profligately self-absorbed woman seeking attention from men with whom she should not be associating.

The wife signifies a nameless force of greed and pride. She is restless and wandering, looking for attention from any man who will give it to her; according to Candy, it is for her that Candy keeps his hand lubricated with Vaseline. Candy tells George that whenever the “guys is around she shows up” looking for Curley or thinking that she’s left something lying around (51). In *Of Mice and Men* Curley’s wife is not trusted by the ranch workers and is portrayed as a tart (29), a tramp (32) and a looloo (50). Whenever she appears the conversations of the workers die and she is intentionally ignored.

Besides being beautiful, the wife, as a dream, is also vicious. After she has entered Crooks’ room unannounced and uninvited in Chapter Four, he asks her to leave and threatens to tell the boss not to let her in the barn any more, to which she responds, “Listen, Nigger, [...] you know what I can do if you open your trap? [...] I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny” (79). This power that the wife has over Crooks seems to be Steinbeck’s representation of the regard the
capitalistic dream had over not only minorities, but all workers in California at the time. When Crooks tells the wife that she has no right in his living space, he is clearly rejecting her in front of others. In the anger that occurs because of this rejection, Steinbeck paints a picture of what can happen to anybody daring to discard the American dream—like Crooks, those who control the dream can have them strung up on a tree. This is significant, for without the dream, no man, woman, or child would keep working. The wife in this scene portrays an image of vicious hope that no man can achieve, no matter how hard he works.

Being the only wife of the novel, she represents the cure for loneliness that the workers cannot have, yet being the only representation of the dream in the book, she leaves a reader asking why any of the workers would want her. The wife tells Lennie before she is killed that she does not like Curley because he gets mad if she is talking to anyone else (84). Earlier she tells Lennie, Crooks, and Candy that she is discontent with her husband because he “spends all his time sayin’ what he’s gonna do to guys he don’t like,” instead of earnestly giving her attention (76). She tells Lennie before she is killed that the only reason she married Curley was to get away from
her mother who had torn up a letter from a man who told her he would put her in movies. In this regard, Curely’s wife is a nameless deceiver who embodies a peculiar similarity to the alluring dream growers had and did not want to give up.

She is unhappy, wandering, and always yearning to be somewhere else. She tells Candy that Curley keeps her in a “two-by-four house” and that the only thing he talks to her about how he will fight anyone (76). This is not a wife who is adored by her husband; she is rather like a jealously guarded trophy that is kept on a shelf. She is enviously protected by Curley and is taken for granted by him; he does not love her, but rather enjoys keeping her, as evident by the way he treats her. It seems Steinbeck writes the wife’s mistreatment to show how those with power treated the American dream itself; they never truly enjoyed it, and only used it as a status symbol to wave in the faces of those who did not, or could not, possess it. The wife, like the dream itself, is something that is to be longed for, envied, and chased after, yet not something that is truly desirable once it has been attained.

Curley’s lack of love for the wife makes itself most evident when he finds her body at the end of the novel. In this scene, instead of breaking down and shedding tears,
he comes “suddenly to life,” crying “I know who done it. That big son-of-a-bitch done it. I know he done it” (94). Instead of becoming sorrowful, Curley becomes vindictive, riling the rest of the workers to arm themselves and kill Lennie.

This is perhaps the way Steinbeck viewed the illusory American dream—it is only owned by those with power, and its myth is greater that its actuality. Like the wife, Steinbeck perhaps views a home in America as being elusive and undesirable once it has been achieved. In addition to this, the wife dresses and acts like a movie star (she tells Lennie that on the same night she met Curley she met a man who told her that he was going to put her in pictures because he thought she was a “natural”) (86). This movie star quality further enforces the idea that she is only an image of something desirably real. The fact that she is the only representation of family and home in the novel reinforces this idea.

In his “Paradox and Dream,” Steinbeck states:

On inspection, it is found that the dream has little to do with reality in American life. Consider the dream on and the hunger for the home. The very word can reduce nearly all of my compatriots to tears. Builders and developers

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never build houses—they build homes [...] Many thousands of these homes are built every year; built, planted, advertised, and sold and yet, the American family rarely stays at home for more than five years. (America and Americans 333)

In this description, we can see that Steinbeck views the home myth as only used to keep men working and dreaming; when they have it, it does not really bring contentment. This same quality can be seen in the case of Curley and his relation with his wife, and is further enforced by the way Whit refers to the woman in Chapter Three when he asks George if he has seen Curley’s “new” wife; this seems to imply that this is not Curley’s first marriage and, like a home, Curley has just recently moved into this new matrimony (50).

Besides a dream that is not truly desirable once it has been attained, Curley’s wife also seems to represent the dream in the context of 1930’s California in that it was jealously guarded by those with power and held from those without. The ranch workers speak of the wife with contempt. They try to stay away from her because they know that to even speak to her would mean certain wrath from Curley. In the scene before Lennie breaks his hand, Curley
is following Slim and pestering him, asking him if he has seen her. This scene is significant in that it directly ties the wife to the dream, for Carlson tells Curley that if he lets her keep hanging around the bunkhouse, he will be have something on his hands he will not be able to do anything about.

This leaves a reader to ask what this something is. Though it is not stated, it can be inferred that it is sexual in nature, since the wife is so seductive and the men, being without women, are prime for this trap. More importantly, however, is the power and control that is associated with anybody even so much as flirting with the wife. When Carlson states Curley would have something that he would not be able to do anything about, he speaks of the men truly experiencing a union that would be more of a threat than simply that which the "wise guys" (George and Lennie) pose to the institution (23). This union of the workers would truly be something the power structure of the ranch, and that of 1930’s California, would surely not be able to handle; the number of workers united together in a single cause would be overwhelming to those responsible for controlling them.

When the wife is viewed as Steinbeck’s stand-in for the typical American dream, it can be seen that any
workers flirting with it can have dangerous consequences both for themselves, in that they will incur the wrath of the power structure, and for the power structure, for its very symbol of power would be jeopardized. In this context, we can see just how much the role of Curley resembles that of the growers of the 1930s who, if they had given into the demands of the migrant workers and given them land to build homes upon, would also be giving them permanence and, therefore, power in California; this would be a situation that they could do nothing about.

Curley’s wife comes to be Steinbeck’s representation of that which was just out of the reach of workers. According to historian Walter J. Stein, these growers waved stability and permanence over workers’ heads in an attempt to keep them pacified and working (Stein 18). This false sense of permanence is seen in Steinbeck’s “Dubious Battle in California” when he write that “[the migrants] have one fixed idea, and that is to acquire land and settle on it” (America and Americans 73). Taking this into consideration, Steinbeck seems to indicate that the wife is the stability the migrants were seeking yet were unable to attain because of their social position. The workers were deceived into believing that not only was there plenty of work in California, but that there would be high
wages for it, and that with them, they would eventually be able to buy a home and have a family, thereby creating the permanence they so desired. With this comparison, Steinbeck shows the growers of California intentionally lying to workers to seduce them with a life they would never be able to achieve; these were lies that were crushed by the communist leaders of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union and are what we find in the death of Curley’s wife.

When Lennie kills Curley’s wife in the novel, we note that he unintentionally does so because she is trying to seductively lure him in with her glamour. In this, Steinbeck paints a metaphoric picture of the American dream killing itself by attempting to lure those who could not be seduced. In the scene previous to her dying, Lennie tells the wife how George is the one who is going to let him tend the rabbits, to which she responds, “Well, if that’s all you want, I might get a couple rabbits myself” (78). In this, we find the dream of the ranch attempting to transform itself into something that would be even alluring to Lennie. By associating herself with rabbits, one would think Lennie would be drawn into the vision she paints, yet remarkably, he is not and simply looks on. In this scene, Steinbeck seems to suggest that the American
dream was manipulated to suit "radical" migrants, yet this manipulation did little to seduce them into believing that anything would change. We see this happening in *The Grapes of Wrath* as those growers at the Hooper Ranch raise wages to bring in more workers, and the "radical" migrants, knowing it is only a ploy, protest the action because they know it will only be temporary (*Grapes of Wrath* 420-424). When Curley's wife tries to adopt Lennie's vision of the dream, he is as unaffected as those communist migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In this, Steinbeck seems to indicate his own vision of communist ideology not being seduced by the guises of an American commodity dream. As Mac shows in *In Dubious Battle*, the role of the American communist was to show the average worker how a system like industrial farming would "poison 'em like a bunch of ants" (*In Dubious Battle* 327). Like Lennie, the leaders of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union would not be seduced, and thereby killed the glamour of capitalism by showing the workers what it really thought about them. If the growers raised wages to five cents per bundle of peaches, it was only to draw in workers. Once the workers had been working for two weeks, the wage would be slashed to two-and-a-half cents for the purpose of increasing profit (*Grapes of Wrath* 420-424).
With this, the workers would not have enough to live and would be basically working as slaves. The communist organizers exposed the growers' myth for what it really was—something that was, at best, undesirable and, at worse, absolutely unattainable. For this, they silenced the lies of the growing associations and depicted an alternate dream.

In the book the wife begins her seduction by telling Lennie that she, like him, enjoys feeling soft things like silk and velvet. In this sense, she is again, trying to align herself with his own dream. Though she thinks he is "nuts," she begins stroking her hair and telling Lennie that unlike Curley's hair which is "just like wire," her hair is "soft and fine" due to the fact that she brushes it so often (88). In this scene, we see that the wife then tells Lennie to feel it. After insisting that he touch it, Lennie grabs hold and of course cannot let go. This causes her to scream, which in turn causes him to place his hand over her mouth and eventually break her neck. In this scene it is interesting to note that Steinbeck has Lennie kill the wife because she attempts to cry out when he is killing her. In the metaphorical reading of the novel, this can be read as Steinbeck's understanding of how communism silenced the voice of the American dream when it
was in the midst of seduction. This is done in Of Mice and Men in much the same manner as it is done in The Grapes of Wrath, for it is as the Joads are driving up to Hooper’s Ranch with the hopes of gaining a decent wage that this hope is also dashed by the radicals screaming, warning them about the lies they have been told.

It seems that Steinbeck interestingly writes Lennie as breaking the wife’s neck, for this metaphorically depicts the communist organizers breaking the connection of the mindful intention and the seductive body of the American dream. Lennie does not crush the wife as he does the puppy or the mouse, nor does he suffocate her as one would think would be happening as he places his hand over her mouth when she begins screaming. He simply tells her not to scream and that George will be mad; then, with a swift jerk, breaks the line that connects her seductive body to her mind.

In this scene we see in a simplistic manner how Steinbeck viewed the communist organizers of the 1930s killing the lies of the growers. It can be noted that Lennie accidentally kills the wife. This seems to be how Steinbeck saw the actions of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union in the 1930s and appears to parallel the way communist organizers killed the lies of
capitalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this novel, Tom does not set out to align himself with the “reds”; however, due to the cruelty of industrialized farming, he ends up getting himself labeled as one because he kills a police officer. In this novel, the communist organizers are simply a backdrop of the story about the migrant Joads, but it is only through these organizers that people are able to find any glimmer of escape from a system that encourages “crime beyond denunciation [...] and failure that topples all [...] success” (*Grapes of Wrath* 385).

Steinbeck viewed communism killing the lies of capitalism in an accidental manner with the rhetoric they espoused; and though the communists worked to tell the migrants what capitalism really thought of them, without having lived through the nightmarish American dream capitalism had to offer in California, the dream would never have been killed. It must be remembered that the communists coming in to help the migrants was a product of the migrants’ situation; had conditions in California been ideal, they would never have been needed. In this sense, Steinbeck shows in *Of Mice and Men* why the seductive dream was killed quickly and accidentally.

In the death of Curley’s wife, Steinbeck also creates a metaphor of the effects of the mid-thirties’ strikes
that took place. Though they resulted in a few gains in the form of wage increases, they unintentionally rallied migrant workers in one movement against the lies of such organizations as the Associated Farmers (Daniel 170). Furthermore, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union, like Lennie, unintentionally killed these glittery lies to show the truth about industrial agriculture. In the wife’s death we find a picture of what was killed by communism: that “cynical plot [used] to attract [the] ever-larger surplus of labor to the state” (Stein 18).

Of Lennie’s Death

With the death of the wife comes a death of a dream. This is most poignantly illustrated when George and Candy are standing over the dead body of Curley’s wife and George tells Candy:

I think I knewed we’d never do her. [Lennie] usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would [...] I’ll work my month an’ I’ll take my fifty bucks an’ I’ll stay all night in some lousy cathouse. Or I’ll set in some poolroom till ever’body goes home. An then
I'll come back an' work another month an' I'll have fifty bucks more (92)

In this scene, all of George’s hopes for a better life are dashed as he realizes that his companion is about to experience the end of his life at the hands of the broader ranch society. George’s tone in this passage reflects a sense of utter disappointment as he comes to terms with the reality of his and Lennie’s situation.

When he states that he knew they would never do “her”, George provides yet another parallel between the dream and the wife. George’s words seem to show that he viewed the dream as being as seductive a woman as Curley’s wife; just as flirting with the wife could be dangerous, so could flirting with a realistic notion of permanence and land ownership. When he sees the wife lying dead upon the floor, he sees his dream as well. In George’s words, a reader sees a reflection of the migrant workers’ mentality as they too realized their own powerlessness in the industrial farming system; they were basically slaves to a system that wanted to keep them as such by deceiving them with a notion that if they only worked a little harder, the dream of permanence could be theirs. George, like the migrant workers, is “too demoralized, too defenseless, too
disoriented to overcome the built-in hindrances to agricultural labor’s organization” (Stein 262).

The novel depicts this type of organization as Curley finds his wife and organizes the posse to hunt Lennie. His attitude reflects the organization of the Associated Farmers in forming their own posses to round up communist agitators. When Curley enters the barn and finds her body, he states, “I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch myself, I’ll shoot him in the guts,” and then follows this with, “Come on, you guys” (94). With this latter demand and his ability to organize the other workers, we find a reflection of the hateful discourse that was being formed and maintained by the Associated Farmers to break the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union. Curley's managing to rile the sentiment of the ranch’s small public seems to be Steinbeck’s metaphoric depiction of the successful effort of the Associated Farmer’s propaganda campaign. We see Curley’s ability to turn even George against Lennie when he turns suspiciously and tells him, “You’re comin’ with us, fella,” and warns him that he had better stick with the posse so they do not think he had anything to do with Lennie’s actions (95).

This mob mentality then becomes a metaphorical representation of the public viewing the “red menace”
threatening California with the organized strikes of the 1930s. According to historian Walter J. Stein:

For the growers and local law enforcement agencies [...the Communists] served as convenient scapegoats for strikes whose roots lay deep. The presence of Communists, too, helped to inflame local opinion against strikers. Tulare's Advance-Register, for example, was confident that 'the strike' would vanish into thin air overnight if the outside agitators were rounded up en masse and escorted out of the country. (225)

This desire to round up and dispose of the communists reflects the mentality of the novel as we see Curley rounding up the workers in order to find and kill Lennie. In order to defend himself then, George decides to kill Lennie himself, as this would not only be the most humane way of ending his life, but would also be the best way of ensuring his own. George's decision parallels Steinbeck's view of the migrant workers' mentality as they too chose to kill their association with communism to ensure their survival.

When Curley is able to instantly unite the men, Steinbeck shows how the death of his wife has brought him
power. Through her death, Curley is able to now justify killing Lennie, something he seems to have wanted to do from his introduction to the giant. It seems that Steinbeck writes this to show how he viewed the growers’ power in rounding up vigilantes to kill those who were destroying their deceitful and seductive dream of work and land ownership.

After the peak of the great California strikes in 1933, in which migrant workers joined up with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union and managed to stunt the production and distribution of such key crops as cotton, peas, and lettuce in order to gain such demands as a ten cent wage increase in 24 of the 37 strikes, area growers began to organize themselves in an all out war of propaganda and intimidation. This war gave rise to a wave of what Carey McWilliams calls, “Farm Fascism” in which the growers began to “form new organizations with which to combat the instinctive struggle of the State’s 250,000 agricultural workers to achieve unionization” (McWilliams 229-230).

The tactics used were brutal. With the aid of the press, the Associated Farmers used such popular newspapers as the LA Times and the Sacramento Bee to publish frightening articles about communist deeds in California.
These articles, in an attempt to arouse the sentiment of the public against the workers' union, would report how the "red menace" was managing to agitate a people coming into the region in search of employment. In addition to the media war, the Associated Farmers also used their lobbying power in Washington to:

- deny federal relief to striking or voluntarily unemployed farmworkers;
- a drive to enact antipicketing and other legislation in agricultural counties as a means of breaking farm strikes;
- and a scheme to eliminate the union leadership through the use of the state's syndicalism law. (Daniel 252)

Through these methods, the Associated Farmers were able to penetrate the movement's heart and destroy migrants' hopes for a better life.

This penetration can be seen in George's taking it upon himself to kill Lennie. George must kill Lennie so that his survival in the face of the larger collected society can be assured. In this, Steinbeck depicts for his reader a society that is able to turn a split hero figure against himself. While George could have told Curley and the others Lennie's precise location, he chooses not to, for he will not let them hurt him (92). George knows
Lennie must be killed, but he also knows that Curley will see to it that Lennie suffers. In this way, George is not really doing the bidding of Curley, but is, instead, taking it upon himself to do what he should probably have done previously--come to terms with the society in which he was living, and come to the realization that Lennie would never have fit into any work ranch into which they would have wandered. It is as if George in this scene is giving into his the words he tells Lennie at the beginning of the book and has decided to get along nicely without him; instead of dreaming of a life outside of the constraints of the oppressive system in which he lives, has now decided to give in to his own powerlessness and had decided to "maybe have a girl" (8-9). In George’s taking it upon himself to kill Lennie so that he can live, we see a picture of how Steinbeck saw the migrants killing their ties to communism so that they and their families could live.

As we see in the death of the wife, the manner in which Lennie is killed carries much significance. In this final scene, George uses the same gun to kill Lennie as Carlson used to kill Candy’s worthless dog. This depicts for the reader not only the uselessness of Lennie in the future dream he and George would have shared, but also, on
a metaphoric level, how Steinbeck viewed the ineffectiveness of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union in the capitalistic dream of increased wages and permanence.

George tells Lennie in this final scene to look out and imagine the land on which they will be living. He then begins telling him the same dream-story that he has been telling him throughout the book, only in this version, the tale changes, and George states that they will be getting the land soon. One thing that George emphasizes in this final scene is that there, “Everybody gonna be nice to [Lennie]. Ain’t gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nor steal” (103). This idealistic dream that George plants in Lennie’s mind just before he shoots him depicts an image of the idealistic goals of unionization in California as Steinbeck probably saw them before their leadership was so abruptly ended.

In looking at the death of Lennie in retaliation for killing Curley’s wife, a reader is led to question the true reasons he is being killed. Surely, with his mentality and lack of moral reasoning, he would not be judged as being “sane” or in his right mind when he broke the wife’s neck. In the same way, Lennie had no predisposition towards premeditation or violence for any
reason. Lennie simply kills her to save his and George’s dream and to ensure his future rabbit-tending position. In a moral reading of the novel, Lennie must be killed because he cannot ever be expected to fit in with the ranch society (Ohnishi 85); however, Lennie’s death makes a reader question whether he truly needed to be killed. Though he did take another’s life, he did not do it out of malice. He had no premeditation or intention to kill her. What Lennie did was an accident, and at best, all he could be judged for would be manslaughter, yet this does not matter to a society that is under the control of a ruthless man like Curley. To Curley, the only justice for Lennie is death, and in this, we see Steinbeck’s judgment of the bunkhouse society, not Lennie.

If we look at Lennie as being Steinbeck’s representation of the communists in 1930’s California, we can see that the communists should have never been judged for their actions either. They were serving a group of misplaced migrants put into a peon class into which they never asked (America and Americans 76). According to literary critic Katsue Ohnishi’s “Why Lennie Must Be Killed”:

The main theme of this novel is the criticism of the society. What Lennie […] want[s] is merely
a few rabbits, a little land, a couple of animals and perhaps the chance of going to a movie occasionally. It is the minimum human desire for happiness, and the society which negates this basic human right to happiness is severely criticized by John Steinbeck. (87)

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck sets up a story that not only criticizes the small ranch society found in the novel, but also the larger Californian industrial farming society in the 1930s. This novel is a work of social protest depicting the death of a dream for thousands of migrant workers as their leadership was on the verge of being crushed by the larger society and they were forced to continue working for menial wages and living in the poorest of conditions; being as such, the death of Lennie portrays the death of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union at the hands of migrant workers for the sake of the migrants' survival.

In Steinbeck's mind, the migrant workers' dignity had been stolen and their American pride had been stripped by the sordidness of industrial farming. When he tells the stories of migrants in articles like "Starvation Under the Orange Trees" and "Dubious Battle in California," we see his heartfelt sympathy for a people who had only their
communist leaders to look to for hope. These were men and women who had been starved and beaten by a system of agriculture that "for all its great produce was a failure" in terms of the treatment of its workers (America and Americans 86). Their communist leaders, like Lennie, wanted an idealistic America where every person was equal and no person was abused for profit. Unfortunately, as Steinbeck apparently viewed it, this vision was as unrealistic in California in the 1930s as it was on the ranch in the novel.

According to historian Carey McWilliams, the union of the migrants and their leaders was broken by:

- the arrests and resultant prosecution [of union leaders], which was staged as an anti-Red carnival [...This] crippled and destroyed the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. Their leadership in prison, the workers were momentarily demoralized; and the great wave of strikes subsided. (228)

In essence, the migrant workers also killed the leadership of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union by doing nothing to help them in light of their public disrepute. By disassociating themselves with the Cannary and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union, the migrant
workers' dream of a better life, one in which they would hold a permanent respectable place in California, also died. Like George who would take his fifty bucks and stay in a cathouse, the migrant workers would take their low pay and poor living condition and do what they had to do to survive. As *Of Mice and Men* ends on a disturbing note of a dream being broken by the disheartening realization of powerlessness and unrequited loyalty, the movement for unionization in the fields of California ends on a similar note:

> While farm workers had demonstrated an almost heroic capacity for economic struggle, given the enormous power arrayed against them, they were powerless to convert their economic gains into the political currency that was the preeminent medium of exchange in the New Deal era. (Daniel 257)

For this, their dream of permanence in California never becomes actualized and the migrants are forced to endure their struggle until the outbreak of the Second World War.

**Conclusion**

As interesting as the story of *Of Mice and Men* is, it is only when we read it in the context of the other two
works that Steinbeck was writing at the time that we find a way to read it as a micro-representation of the historical events that seem to have intrigued Steinbeck at this point in his writing career. In Of Mice and Men, we can see the struggles of the migrant workers to build permanence in California as found in The Grapes of Wrath and the discourse surrounding the violent struggle to attain this permanence found in In Dubious Battle.

Perhaps what makes a hero (pulp or otherwise) so interesting is not his strengths, but his weaknesses. In Of Mice and Men, a reader finds a split hero who is eventually overcome because his ideal qualities of strength of mind and purity of heart are split between two people. In George and Lennie, we find a split hero resembling a Dark Rider coming into a ranch with nothing more than a dream of a better life. This ranch is filled with men who are the “loneliest guys in the world,” because they have no permanence or bonding with others (15).

When George and Lennie come into the ranch, they do so sharing a bond with each other and a dream of permanence outside the capitalistic structure. Their dream is filled with camaraderie and brotherhood instead of isolation and loneliness. This dream becomes like a
poignant weapon which is used to shatter a lonely fictitious American dream, represented in the novel by Curley’s wife; this artifice is waved in the ranch workers’ faces every day to keep them struggling for nothing but a stake in an uncertain fate.

When we view George and Lennie as Steinbeck’s representation of the split hero of the movement of migrants and American communism in 1930’s California, we gain a better understanding of Steinbeck’s vision of this movement’s gains and losses. Like George and Lennie, the movement achieves a shattering and elusive vision of the American dream and crushes the oppressive hand of industrialized farming. But also like George and Lennie, because one half of the movement is so out of place and is more trouble that it is worth, it only attains a temporary victory.

As we look at the strikes of today, we still find workers struggling for recognition of basic needs. Though the needs may be different today in the respect that they are for such things as health care and a living wage, one thing is typically for certain—it is not until unionization takes place and workers fight that any steps are taken on the part of large corporations to meet them. This was as true of 1930’s America as it is of today’s.
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