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# Of Life and Men A study of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

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# **Of Life and Men**

## **A study of John Steinbeck's**

### ***Of Mice and Men***

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## Introduction

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is a classic in American literature, studied each year by hundreds of pupils. It was written in 1937, telling the tragic story of Lennie Small and George Milton, two migrant workers in California during the Great Depression. It is one of the three novels composing what critics have called the 'Californian cycle', along with *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. These novels have in common to give a voice to the Californian working class of the thirties. These people were struggling to survive the Great Depression when their lands were being seized and hundreds of them found themselves on the roads moving to a faraway place where they would find jobs or wandering from ranches to ranches, offering their help.

Critics soon classified Steinbeck into the new movement of writers who took up some Marxist and more generally socialist ideas or ideals in their novels. However, Steinbeck was not a member of the communist party and even declared to his agents in a letter that he thought there were as many communisms as communists (Astre, 1977). *Of Mice and Men* is thus more than a mere pamphlet protesting about the life conditions of the migrant workers. His good knowledge of these men's life and language provided his novel with a wider dimension: the story can be assimilated to that of persecuted minorities or silent people whose sufferance goes on unnoticed.

Steinbeck originally gave his book the title *Something That Happened*. However, he changed it into *Of Mice and Men* after he read Robert Burn's poem *To A Mouse* (see Appendix 1), a poem telling the lamentations of a farmer who destroyed a mice's nest while plowing his field and his thoughts on life this event inspires him. This poem thus deals with the themes of life's unkept promises and mice's ability to enjoy the present without fearing the future, contrary to men. Indeed, the novel is about failed dreams, lost hopes and loneliness, but also about learning how to give up, how to grow up and how to adapt. Steinbeck's change of title therefore reveals the brevity of life and its relative lack of importance when compared with the whole history of mankind but also the similarities between a mouse's life and that of a human, both struggling to keep their houses and to stay alive as long as possible. *Of Mice and Men* is thus the story of one of

these banal lives, which is nothing but a mere drop in the ocean of lives but which yet brings something new and allows mankind to evolve, as it has always been, just because of this one more fight for survival. However, the Scottish poet Robert Burns' entire verse suggests the somewhat pathetic aspect of this eternal struggle for a little bit of time bonus on Earth: "the best led schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley". The irony resides in the fact that despite the smallness of their lives, both men and mice keep making plans to secure the future, which are inevitably destroyed like a nest or a farm. This note of sarcasm reaches its high peak at the end of Steinbeck's novel with Lennie's death and the destruction of the edenic dream at the same time.

This dream is at the core of the novel, for it stands for these doomed plans men keep making about the future. They embody both men's highest hopes and secret dreams but also represent the pathetic dimension there is in making such plans out of fear for the future, the unknown. All the living species appears to be creatures living perpetually on guards, go to work every day for their dreams to come true and when these are destroyed, they build other plans, without wondering why their dreams did not become real. The original American dream is one of these utopian dreams, come out of the brain of some persecuted people who dreamt of a pure and peaceful life on a new continent. However, this dream evolved and transformed into an exploiting society too busy at realizing more and more profits than caring about its citizens' expectations. Steinbeck deplores this society claiming to be favoring progress and evolution by introducing the reader to the world of itinerant workers, still victims of racism, old age ostracism and mental illness discrimination. Such a world does not keep the characters from dreaming of a farm with a couple of acres and a few rabbits, even when they meet other dreamers, disillusioned ones. Curley's wife and her Hollywood dream of becoming an actress although she comes from a small town in a Californian valley, Crooks and his dream of equality between black and white or even Candy and his hope about his old days he wishes to be peaceful, reflected by how he would have wanted his old dog to die are as many doomed dreams, almost naive. Steinbeck's critics have seen in this dream some nostalgia of the old golden days of the discovery of the American continent and declared the end of the novel the evidence of Steinbeck's pessimistic view of the future of this society.

The purpose of our study is to attenuate the pessimistic reputation this novel car-

ries to reveal its strong positive message, even though its general tone tends to justify its reputation. In fact, Steinbeck's influences give it a formative dimension through the life lesson taught by its hero, George. The reader undergoes the same progression George goes through during the three days this short novel lasts, three days which are not without reminding the reader of another three days, the time it took to Christ to prove his followers they had not believed in him in vain.

In fact, the Bible is one of Steinbeck's major influence, the second being of more pagan descent; the Arthurian legends. Indeed, Steinbeck tackles ancient questions which have already been asked and developed in myths in an attempt to explain them. Fate is one of these: the issue of hereditary sins, the impact of our forbears' acts or missed opportunities in our lives appear in Steinbeck's novel as in the two major founding literary works of Western literature. This idea of fate is particularly present in the Bible, whose two testaments tend to divide the massive collection of books into two parts, the story of Jesus and that of his ancestors. In fact, the Bible not only bears the mythical responsibility of explaining the origins but it also tells the story of mankind and its failures. The teaching aspect lies in this revelation of men's actual condition and the mistakes made by their ancestors which determined their fate. However, the process of this biblical redemption is developed by the Arthurian references. These are not new in Steinbeck's novels: *Tortilla Flat*, written two years before *Of Mice and Men* openly draws parallels between these men's quest and that of the knights of Camelot. Moreover, Steinbeck's last work was the rewriting of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which his death has left incomplete. The quest for the Holy Grail and the tests needed to be surmounted inspired Steinbeck and it is visible in *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck illustrates in his novel the different causes which triggered the failure of Lancelot or Adam, and stresses the fact that the new generation has the role and the duty to learn from these mistakes in order not to commit them again, hence the formative aspect of the novel.

In order to develop this point, we will take a close look at characterization, and the various roles assumed by Steinbeck's ranchers. Lennie is a paradox, for he is a child in a giant's body, does not possess an ounce of nastiness but cannot help killing mice and frightening girls when petting their soft manes, is a dreamer who hates violence but almost destroys Curley's hand when told by George to defend himself. A victim of his own strength and ignorant of how to handle it, as a child who would have grown up too



fast, he completely relies on George to take care of him. This one appears disappointed by his life and keeps complaining about how difficult it is to be responsible for Lennie's acts. George appears rather mysterious, for he curses his current life but shares Lennie's dream, among other things. It seems to the reader that there is a discontinuity between what he thinks and what he would like to be doing. This divided state of mind needs to be solved in order for George to find peace so he can be 'complete'. Slim plays an important role as well: in fact, this character immediately appears to the reader as a royal figure. A progression is visible in George as soon as he talks to Slim, and as George learns from Slim's wise answers, the reader learns about the complexity of this character. Slim is a major piece in George's progression, for he guides him in the hard apprenticeship of life, thus bearing strong similarities with the formers of novice during the initiation rites in some tribes.

Finally we will examine Steinbeck's vision of the kind of plans men need to make so these projects can be realized. George is his creation, the model he founded in order to make the reader realize the paradox of his species: master of all the species on Earth but who still does the same thing as a little mouse whose nest has just been destroyed, rebuild it somewhere else. Our aim is to draw attention to what Steinbeck had himself in mind when he wrote the novel, for he changed the title. Life is not just something that happens, but a succession of small acts for survival. In that extent, Steinbeck, witness of the changes the society he lived in was going through, chose to offer his solution to humanity's endless quest for mastering: mastering death, God(s), the unknown, the future. This is this solution we are going to study and George's progression to come to it, for the reader undergoes the same initiation.

## **Part 1**

**The founder myths of *Of Mice and Men*, the ‘ancestors’  
of the *Bildungsromane***

### ***1) The influence of Christianity: the Bible.***

Steinbeck is an occidental writer; he was born in a country whose history is closely linked to Christianity and thus carries an important unconscious religious background which influences his writing. Therefore, it is essential to have a look at the biblical references in *Of Mice and Men*, their significances, and the consequences on the reading of the novel. For this purpose, Gérard Genette's works on transtextuality (1982) cannot be ignored. He developed the term from Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, inserting it into what he thought to be a wider category, transtextuality. He classified the latter into five subtypes in *Palimpsestes*: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality. Genette defines the latter as what he calls : "toute relation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerais hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerais, bien sûr, hypotexte) sur lequel il se greffe d'une manière qui n'est pas celle du commentaire" (7). Here, this hypotext would be the Bible. As for the hypertext – thus a text linked to the hypotext by its themes, symbols and recurrent references – one may justifiably object that *Of Mice and Men* is not Steinbeck's novel which contains the most significant biblical references; in fact, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) happens to be a novel strongly and blatantly linked to the Bible, whose characters are biblical characters and whose plot reminds the reader of the Exodus. However, *Of Mice and Men* was written in 1937 between an Arthurian novel, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), and a biblical one (Steinbeck and Wallsten 1975, 96). It thus unites in the same book both of Steinbeck's major influences; the Arthurian legends and the Bible. We will focus on the latter for this part.

The Bible appears to be a major literary influence in the Christianized part of the world, most of the time unconscious and unintended by the writers. However, we think it is important to clarify some essential points: the Bible is to be looked at from a literary aspect, there will be no religious questions debated – in the sense of faith and belief –, the issue of the literarity of the Bible and its influence on the literary production since then, all potential hypertexts, will be the only aspect studied.

The question of the literarity of the Bible has been debated – and still is – among critics but its strong influence upon literature is no longer to be contested. Olivier Millet even asserts in his introduction to his collected essays on the Bible and literature that it is one

of the three major sources of the Western culture, along with the Greco-Latin culture and the Celtic inheritance (8). It can thus be considered as the hypotext – in the words of Genette – of numerous literary productions, and we will see that *Of Mice and Men* is not an exception: the biblical occurrences are ever-present all over the novel.

First of all, a global study reveals a cyclical structure. At the beginning, the two main characters, Lennie and George, stop by the Salinas River down the road, and the last scene takes place at the same spot. Nature is thus given an important place, for the story starts and ends in an entirely vegetal and animal environment, where no one is to be found except Lennie and George. This is the first similarity with the Bible, which also has a cyclical structure through the theme of Christ's rebirth. Northrop Frye dealt with the subject of cycle in the Bible in his *Great Code*, mentioning that even though the Bible is reluctant to admit any influence of anything pagan or assimilated to pagan beliefs, some books were written assimilating "Jesus to the revolving cycle of nature" (96), for the parallel is too obvious not to be pointed out. In fact, Christ's death and rebirth seem similar to the evolution of the natural elements throughout the year.

Moreover, the original paradise is a garden where nature is a synonym for a peaceful and innocent happiness, in osmosis with the very first human beings, a "retreat from the world to a primeval innocence" as Peter Lisca calls it (134). The same atmosphere is to be found at the beginning of *Of Mice and Men*, where the natural landscape of the Salinas River banks is described with words such as "quietly", "noiselessly" (4). Northrop Frye depicts the Garden of Eden as "an oasis imagery of trees and water" (1982, 142): it could perfectly be the description of the beginning of Steinbeck's novel. Indeed, trees and water are the setting of the cyclical structure of the Bible and *Of Mice and Men*. They both refer to a safe and protected place, where the codes and the way of living are different – Adam and Eve start to feel ashamed of their nudity at the moment they are expelled from the garden of Eden – and in Steinbeck's novel, the place appears to be a shelter from the dangers of the outside world, almost a world in the world: George tells Lennie "to come right here an' hide in the brush" if anything goes wrong at the ranch (17). Trees and water strengthen the hypertextual link with the Bible, adding a symbolical meaning to the 'safe oasis' aspect we just discussed:

indeed, these two images of an edenic place are to be found in several passages of the Bible.

Water is a purifying image, bringing life and salvation: the numerous baptisms, the purging Flood, Moses creating a miraculous and vital spring in the desert are as many proofs of the importance of water in a biblical context. The symbolical importance of water springs into focus when it is taken into account that the places described in the Bible are situated in an arid zone of the planet, and thus for its inhabitants, water truly is ‘liquid gold’. Besides, as mentioned by Northrop Frye, it was water which was pouring out of Jesus’ side when pierced by the Roman’s spear in order to complete Christ’s execution (1982, 147). According to Robert de Boron, first writer to explicitly give a Christian explanation of the Holy Grail myth, this water was to be collected in a cup of gold by Joseph of Arimathea, cup which was to become the aim of one of the most famous quest in literature and history, the quest of the Holy Grail (Walter 2004, 20).

The vegetation is not to be left out, as there are many sorts of trees mentioned in the Bible, among them the sycamore. This tree is known as the Egyptian fig tree or *ficus sycomorus* and also illustrates the cyclical structure, for it is the symbol of rehabilitation – it produces new branches when it is cut, even totally buried into the sand.<sup>1</sup> These trees were also wise men’s and prophets’ preaching place, and Zacchaeus climbed on a sycamore in order to see Jesus’ arrival. This is one of many references to down to up – and vice versa – trips, and will be discussed later. Moreover, the sycamore is a popular tree in California, and thus finds its place into Steinbeck’s depiction of nature in *Of Mice and Men*. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, the characters find a quiet spot down the road, near the river, where they will spend the night before going to the ranch:

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<sup>1</sup> It might look strange to the informed reader of the Bible to read here that the trees where wisdom was to be heard were sycamores instead of fig trees. However, there were well and truly sycamores, only known as Egyptian fig trees – and thus merely translated as ‘fig trees’. [http://www.eglisededieuouremont.com/edo/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=135:le-sycomore-et-lhysope&catid=37:autres-text&Itemid=49](http://www.eglisededieuouremont.com/edo/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=135:le-sycomore-et-lhysope&catid=37:autres-text&Itemid=49). Feb 2010.

The valley side of the river is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool (3).

Later on, the “limb of a giant sycamore” is mentioned as a place where men had made campfires (4). This is the first description of nature, and it will remain the only one until the end, where the tranquility of the same place is depicted once again, emphasizing the dramatic atmosphere in this last scene. But the first biblical references about trees to come to mind are indeed the tree of Life and the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the *Book of Genesis*. By eating the fruit of the latter, Adam and Eve lose the benefits of the former, which were to live forever in this state of innocence and peace. The circle is complete then, according to Frye (1982,147): “Adam and Eve, then, when they are expelled from Eden, lose the tree and water of life, and at the very end of the Bible it is the tree and water of life that are restored to redeemed mankind (Revelation 22,1-2)”. The cyclical nature of the Bible is thus to be found in its symbolical images, as in *Of Mice and Men*, where nature is to be found at the beginning and at the end, bringing peace and relief to the characters when they need it most, as a silent witness of men's hectic lives.

Trees also offer another perspective to the cyclic one, the vertical one. We have mentioned Zacchaeus, a small man who climbed on a sycamore in order to be able to see Jesus above the crowd. This is not the first occurrence of a vertical imagery in the Bible, the most obvious one is Jacob's dream of the ladder in the *Book of Genesis*, which angels keep climbing up and down, revealing the existence of an upper world and links between this world and humans', and then a need to rise up to a superior level in order to catch a glimpse of the divine. The cross upon which Jesus dies bears the same significance: this piece of wood sends the living divinity back to the upper level he came from. Moreover, the cross has the symbolical meaning of meeting, intersection, union: the horizontal line represents the human and natural world whereas the vertical line embodies the divinity. Northrop Frye introduces the reader to the notion of *axis mundi* in his passage about the tree of Life. He defines it as “a kind of *axis mundi*, the vertical perspective of the mythical universe, in which the earth is so often a middle earth between a world above and a world below” (1982, 149). The whole pastoral imagery in the Bible is thus associated with the divine, it links humans to the divinity:

nature is a tool which is meant to help men to reach (back) to the upper world. This reinforces the literary aspect of the Bible, and more precisely its similarities to myths.

It would be a misuse of language to classify the Bible as a literary production according to Northrop Frye, though he carries on explaining that most of its elements are written in a language specific to myths and metaphors (1990, 96). In fact, we have seen that the Bible contains several pagan elements, like the natural elements we just dealt with, for early Christians needed to include some known themes and symbols to it in order to make it acceptable and identifiable to by the local populations still adoring pagan gods, most of them related to natural elements. Many biblical stories are adapted from preexistent pagan myths, though throughout the Bible, pagans are being chased, punished, and their gods are proved to be inefficient.<sup>2</sup> However, the will – and the need – to set its authority as a religion and not as any belief or ritual was the strongest and the Bible had to make ‘concessions’ to gain people’s hearts and minds. Thus, through the adaptation of pagan myths, the ritualizing of major Christian feasts and the spread of a sacred and mystic aspect of a divinity one should respect and fear, the Bible starts to bear a resemblance to the same myths it wanted to replace and eradicate if possible.

Mircea Eliade discusses the sacred aspect of the myth, which, according to him, comes from the fact myths tell the story of the origins (1963, 15). Therefore, myths also narrate the story of the one or those who created the actual world; god(s). This is a common point with the Bible: the divine is everywhere, in every man’s single events of his life, and thus is to be feared. This omnipresence of the divinity leads biblical or mythical characters to respect it and to follow its principles as a guide, out of fear for possible punishment and praise for what God gave them. This last point leads us to wonder what the aim of myths is. In fact, their formative aspect could be seen as an attempt to solve the everlasting mystery about how life came to earth, or a lesson one would be well-advised to apply to his own life. There actually are several kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> The defeated gods of Egypt, unable to protect their people from the Ten Plagues; Moses’ furious destruction of the golden calf erected by the people of Israel in the desert; the first commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" are as many signs of a strong will to eradicate any form of paganism. (*The Holy Bible*, Exodus 9, 10, 11, 32:7, 20:3)

myths: the category which caught our attention is the one of ideological myths, because of its similarities with the Bible. Northrop Frye tackles this issue in the second chapter of his book, *Words with power*: according to him, it is when their ideological function disappears that myths become “pure literature” (1990, 52). The Bible kept its sacred aspect and thus its ideological purpose, contrary to the Greek mythology for instance, whose ‘Bible’ was Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* at that time, a book now only studied for its literary facet.<sup>3</sup> Ideological myths are meant to teach, educate their readers, telling their own history as a story. This is the Bible’s role, for its stories and their ends aim at educating the readers, then building on what they have read. However, this does not mean that myths are historically true, this would be questioning the Bible’s historicity and this is not the point here. It seems preferable to say that myths offer a romanticized and symbolical version of history, or even create a story that looks like an historical event, belonging to the past. In fact, myths use this old and effective method of teaching: learn from your mistakes. Here, it is about learning from one’s ancestors’ errors: the Old Testament is full of examples of what happens when the Ten Commandments are violated. Israel is by turns defeated, sent into exile, and partly exterminated by wars, results of the population’s misbehaviour. Sometimes, God even punishes his most faithful in order to test their faith, like Job, tackling here the burning issue of undeserved divine punishment and God’s “goodness” or “cruelty”. However, redemption is possible, Israel’s God is not spiteful: when a man admits he faulted, and does penance, he is forgiven (II Chronicles 7:14).

This ambiguous reaction of the divinity towards sins is also to be found in Greek mythology for instance, in a more frivolous tone; gods’ mood is fluctuant and men are just puppets, victims of their sins as well as divinities’ disposition. It just reinforces the idea of respect and humility, of humans’ smallness compared to gods’, an idea present in the Bible too. Therefore, a man has to learn from his forefathers’ faults, but also is confronted to hazard, or as some like to name it; god(s)’ inclination. Two major lessons are thus to be learnt by the younger generations, the first one being: everyone has to

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* Frye adds that Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was considered for centuries as the “pagan counterpart of the Bible, beginning with stories of creation and flood and proceeding to stories of metamorphosis.” (97)



answer for their transgressions and will be punished for them in this life or the other if they do not do penance. The second one would be an amendment to the first one: hazard has to be taken into account and men shall never curse the divinity for what is happening to them, have they deserved it or not, otherwise they will be punished for being unfaithful and unworthy of gods' care. We can thus notice that ideological myths aim at educating the category of people they are written for, through teaching them about their origins, their presence on earth, and the after-life. However, to these motives – real didactic ones – can be added another purpose: to teach a lesson which will allow the readers not to make the same mistakes their predecessors did. Myths are thus not merely explanatory but also real guides for life. A modern counterpart for myths would be apprenticeship novels, or *Bildungsromane*. In fact, although these novels do not inevitably tell the history of humanity, they are meant to be educative, or at least show a progression between a starting point and an arrival, a progression undertaken by the hero.

The Bible has its hero in the person of Jesus, the whole Bible revolving around him: myth and *Bildungsroman* are united here, for the usual cyclical structure of myths is respected and a progression is to be observed. Indeed, Paul considers Christ as a second Adam, redeeming humanity instead of cursing it, going back to the upper world instead of falling down on earth, fulfilling the circle (I Corinthians 15:22, 15:45). This movement was called “U-shaped structure” by Northrop Frye, illustrating the Fall and Redemption (1990, 169). As for the progression, we have witnessed the development of the Bible which aims at spreading an exemplary lifestyle through education dealing with faith, punishment and redemption. Can these motifs be found in *Of Mice and Men*? We are going to study the possibility to find not only the same circular structure but also the same themes in one of the most ancient books, cornerstone of several religions and in what was said to be a proletarian novel.

In fact, when looking closely at the two books, there appears to be more similarities than differences. We have discussed the fact that one is the hypotext of the other; therefore, according to Genette's theories, the hypertext is entirely readable without its hypotext, though one cannot pretend to have explored the book from every angle if one has not read the hypotext it derives from (554). The reading of the Bible or,

at least, a good knowledge of its contents happens to be necessary for a close study of Steinbeck's 'Mice book'. There are two heroes in this book; however, only one remains at the end, he is the one Steinbeck defined as his hero: "George is a hero and only heroes are worth writing about" (1975, 563). We have mentioned the cyclical structure of the novel: as the characters end up at the spot near the river, where they paused a few days earlier before going to the ranch, but George also undergoes a cycle, or a "U-shaped" change at a personal level, towards the end: as Christ is buried in a sepulchre hewn in stone, George goes **down** to the spot on the river banks, both chased by a crowd, and both will climb back **up** to the world, transformed. This is one of numerous parallels which can be drawn between the two texts. George also shares with his counterpart the telling of parables: the farm, whose rabbits Lennie will be allowed to take care of, functions as a promise for a better future, only possible and reachable if Lennie behaves. Christ's parables about a "kingdom of heaven" sound similar in terms of conditions for entering this heaven: only the perseverant, the humble, and the respectful of weaker living being – like mice – will get over the gate (Matthew 5:3-10). Jesus warned his people about this last point; respect and help the poorer and smaller than you, thus it is made clear in *Of Mice and Men* that George cares for Lennie and is protecting him, mostly from himself, although he keeps on grumbling about him being a "lot of trouble" (1937, 9).

George is a modern character, hence he does not speak with images but with guesses and paradoxes; he likes Lennie's company but keep complaining about him; he tells the farm dream to Lennie several times but admits at the end he had never truly believed in its capacity to become true. This is this denial which can be the major difference with Christ. George appears to be entirely pessimistic – the ending confirms it – and his grumpy behavior reinforces that aspect, whereas the Messiah is nothing but love, forgiveness, patience. However, one must not forget that the relation between two texts has not to be plagiaristic, or identical: both texts have to deal with their ages, and to adapt to their readers. This is the case here, men in the late thirties were not supposed to be some soft and dreamy creatures devoid of common sense. But, further than the tone or the behaviour, one must have a look at the burden: George is acting like a guide for Lennie. The latter symbolizes the innocent and the dreamer, almost childlike, children being the persons Jesus said he could be found into. Both have the role of a

‘leader’ here, protecting the weakest and being living examples for the others. Moreover, George appears to be the only man in the ranch to discern Curley’s wife’s true nature, where others are merely fascinated by her (33).<sup>4</sup> So did Jesus when tempted by the devil in the desert: he repaired the mistake made a thousand years before him by the Israelites when their chief Moses was on the mount, receiving God’s Ten Commandments, in a desert too, the adoration of a golden idol.

But the main similarity is the sacrifice in order to save human beings. Jesus let people nail him onto the cross, for his sacrifice allowed mankind the possibility of redemption. As for George, Steinbeck’s own words are eloquent: “And in hopelessness – George is able to rise to greatness – to kill his friend to save him” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 1975, 563). George, the witness of Candy’s dog’s elimination, decides to commit murder in order to spare his friend an assassination by an unknown hand, or a life in a prison or an asylum. Death appears to be the only way out, as it is the case for Christ. Moreover, a parallel can be drawn between the Bible, *Of Mice and Men* and folktales: they all have one or several stories whose heroes are three brothers – three being here a symbolical figure for the expression of diversity and numbers–<sup>5</sup> who have to accomplish a task, a father’s last wish, a king’s order for instance. The first brother usually fails, as does the second one. However, the last brother, the younger one, succeeds, thanks to more accurate senses, or merely out of superiority of mind, but also thanks to his brothers’ experience. This is the case here; Jesus is the descendant of all the men whose story was told in the Ancient Testament, and thus succeeds in redeeming mankind and showing the people the way, which they failed to do. In *Of Mice and Men*, George, representative of a new generation of workers, learns from Candy’s mistake – the old man being the embodiment of a declining group of itinerant workers – and thus frees Lennie by himself, an essential act which will give to the morbid aspect of murder a broader dimension, a necessary action aiming at freeing Lennie from this world and in

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<sup>4</sup> This particular aspect of George’s personality reminds the reader of Ulysses’ similar reaction in Homer’s *Iliade* and *Odyssey* when confronted to the mermaids’ singing: he refrained from listening to their tempting singing and warned his companions, just like George does.

<sup>5</sup> Three is also the number of the divine, the trinity. <http://www.greatdreams.com/three/three.htm>. March 2010.

doing so, allowing himself to progress as well. Northrop Frye expresses this progression revolving around the hero, the latter being the subject and the agent of this evolution: “in myths the characters are usually gods; in romance they are heroes; then we come down to the tragic figures in Shakespeare, and then to the less heroic, but quite equally universal, characters closer to our time” (1990, 55). Curiously, he lists the exact enumeration Steinbeck made about what he considered to be the most influential literary pieces of work.<sup>6</sup> The motif of evolution is thus an important theme to tackle for writers, and is adapted to their times.

Nature is present in the heroes’ progression, as a guide, showing the way. This world has its immutable laws, and because of this, every element is evolving peacefully inside a circular pattern. The natural world is a kind of matrix; it was a shelter for man at the origins but like a child, he has to leave this comfortable world to progress. This progression is told through diverse forms but the burden remains the same; this is the role of myths. They are like vectors for a communication of experience and thus are useful tools for a development. However, development is operating at an inner level, that is to say it brings deep changes to individuals. These individuals play the same role as nature, they become guides and examples for the rest of mankind. But progression implicates a quest, for without a goal, there is no progression.

## ***2) The influence of the Arthurian legends: the quest for the Holy Grail.***

The allusion to quest leads us to deal with Steinbeck’s second influence, the Arthurian legends. He had a great admiration for Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, and even wrote his own adaptation of this compilation of French and English Arthurian romances, *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, published posthumously. A chivalric and heroic atmosphere is thus perceptible in Steinbeck’s novels and *Of Mice and Men* is no exception. The references to the tales of the Celtic knights’ quests tend to be subtle but they are present. We have seen earlier that the Bible and Steinbeck’s ‘Mice book’ were closely linked, having in common a similar structure, that of the quest. It is

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<sup>6</sup>Talking about Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*: “This is odd because I don’t know any book save only the Bible and perhaps Shakespeare which has had more great effect on our morals, our ethics and our modes than this same Malory.” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 1975:540)

also obviously the case for the Arthurian novels: quest is the basis, at the heart of these legends, and their object is the Holy Grail. We will thus pay attention to this final goal, studying its significance in the Arthurian quests, what the ‘Grails’ in the Bible and in *Of Mice and Men* are and to what extent they are linked. We will also focus on what caused the previous failures – those committed by the first heroes – in the three literary productions, for we have just examined the importance of the ancestors and their mistakes in the present characters’ quest. Finally, we will firmly link our hero, George, to its second counterpart, Galahad, and consider their similarities – and thus their consequences on George’s quest.

The Holy Grail appeared rather late in the Arthurian novels, contrary to a common belief. It was introduced in 1182-1183 by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Conte du Graal* (Walter 2004, 16).<sup>7</sup> From this moment, it became an important motif of the Cycle and was a key element in the Christianization of the tale later on. Chrétien de Troyes first described it as a sort of plate, which became in Robert de Boron’s version the vessel in which Jesus is supposed to have eaten his last supper, and then an analogy was made between this plate and the cup in which Joseph of Arimathea is said to have collected Christ’s blood (Walter 2004, 20). It thus became – and still is – this small sacred cup of gold, unreachable, whose mystery remains unsolved.

Its symbolism took various shapes over the years, as Pauline Matarasso explains in her chapter about the meaning of the Holy Grail in her book *The Redemption of Chivalry*: in the *Queste del Saint Graal* it represents God’s grace, as its final sentence states: “li Saint Graax, ce est la grace del Saint Esperit” (quoted in Matarasso 180). She also cites another interpretation, that of Albert Pauphilet, who thought the Holy Grail was the embodiment of God himself, for it has similar attributes: “immatériel, omniprésent, entouré d’êtres célestes” (180). A passage from an essay by René Guénon on the symbolism of the Grail opens the way to other interpretations: “It is then said that the Grail was given into Adam’s keeping in the Earthly Paradise, but that Adam, in

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<sup>7</sup> It is not the only common misconception about the Arthurian cycle: contrary to what is usually assumed, the Arthurian motifs as we know them did not appear all at the same time, they were gradually included over the years and the flourishing versions of the story (Walter 2004, 17).

his turn, lost it when he fell, for he could not bear it with him when he was driven out of Eden”.<sup>8</sup> In the light of this extract, the Grail can therefore be the reminder of Paradise Lost, and thus symbolizing this state of plenitude – hence the arduous and necessary quest to find it. Guénon points out the ejection from a garden of eternity to a “temporal sphere” and thus the link between eternity and the Grail, giving an explanation to this timelessness of the Grail and to the quest undertaken to find back this lost eternity, another close link between the legend and Christianity.

Therefore, the Grail embodies several meanings to those who have studied its apparition in Arthurian legends and the symbolical role it played in them, as the object of a quest. We have presented the intertextual links between the Bible, the Arthurian legends and *Of Mice and Men*, the latter being the result of the influence of the first two on Steinbeck’s work. In the Arthurian legends, progression is better known as quest, for an explicit purpose is given to the heroes’ progression. Moreover, as stated by Warren French, “the fundamental parallels – the knightly royalty, the pursuit of the vision, the creation of a bond (shared briefly by Candy and Brooks), and its destruction by an at least potentially adulterous relationship – are there” (1961, 73). The principal motifs proper to the Arthurian quest are present in Steinbeck’s book. Therefore, we are going to study what stands for the ‘Grail’ in *Of Mice and Men*, and make out which of the interpretations we have just introduced could concern the novel. Indeed, one of these analyses seems to be of great interest for our subject: the grail as the symbol of the Paradise Lost. This motif is clearly at the core of Steinbeck’s novel, represented by the dream shared by the two major characters, George and Lennie.<sup>9</sup> This dream appears from the beginning of the novel with the rabbits Lennie mentions. The reader does not know anything yet about those rabbits but even then it seems that it is one of Lennie’s obsessions according to George: “The hell with the rabbits. That’s all you ever can remember is them rabbits.” (6). Later on in the novel, Lennie asks George to “tell [him] about the rabbits” (15). There follows a scene of great importance, for the readers at

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/uploads/ArticlePDFs/242.pdf>. April 2010.

<sup>9</sup> The reader might notice that George’s family name is Milton, like John Milton, the poet who wrote *Paradise Lost*. (Lemardeley 1992, 74).

least as much as for the characters. A climate of story-telling mingled with what seems to be a ritualized event sets in: “George’s voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before” (15). And George can start to tell the everyday life of itinerant workers. However, Lennie soon gives the impression of knowing the story by heart, an impression confirmed by George later in the dialogue, but he keeps on telling “how it’s gonna be”:

“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 –”

“An’ live off the fatta the lan’,” Lennie shouted. (16).

Peter Lisca saw the rabbits as a synecdoche for a safe place: the dream is, according to him, a sort of mental “spot by the river” (135). Besides, this scene will be repeated several times in the novel, accentuating the sacred aspect of this dream and the importance it takes in the characters’ life.

This aspiration to private property is a classic in American literature, for it is part of the United States’ history. The first pioneers established colonies, each farmer cultivating his own parcel of land. Property is part of the American dream, and might have been even more desired during the Great Depression, when our story takes place. Therefore, this dream of the farm can be *Of Mice and Men*’s Holy Grail, for it represents an ideal, Lennie and George’s Garden of Eden, the vision they pursue. Philippe Walter even goes further in saying that by extension, the island where the Grail is situated can become a figure of Heaven (152). In the Bible, a similar vision is sought out by the worshiper: as we have seen earlier, he has to avoid making the same mistakes his ancestors did and aims at finding back the state of peaceful innocence and purity present in the Garden of Eden, enlightened by Christ’s teaching. Consequently, the Grail bears the symbolical significance of a goal to reach. It is called a dream in *Of Mice and Men*, heaven in the Bible but it keeps the same meaning and role, that of the final step of a quest.

However, despite its highly sacred aura and its metaphorical aspect, we must not forget the original content of the Grail. The legend about its origins, that is to say the vessel Christ used for the Last Supper – a vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea gathered the Messiah’s blood and which will become a cup of gold over the years, as the rewritings

went on – reveals that blood has an important symbolical meaning: it is the result of a killing, though it is sacred and gives holy powers to its receptacle. There is a paradox when it comes to blood, in *Of Mice and Men* and in its hypotext, as pointed out by Philippe Walter: “répandre le sang peut-être un crime ou un acte salvateur. Le sang peut aussi guérir. Le mythe du Graal se trouve au cœur de cette ambivalence.” (21). According to Christianity, Jesus’ blood was shed so that humanity could be redeemed. George kills his friend to spare him from a lynching or worse, and Percival’s sister gives her blood to heal the leper – and in doing so, allows her brother and his two friends, Bors and Galahad, to be united on the boat which will lead them to Corbenic, the Fisher King’s castle where the Holy Grail awaits them. Walter gives an important place to the meaning of blood in myths:

Le sang est toujours au cœur du mystère. Il est à l’origine et au terme de la quête. Il conduit vers l’énigme de la mort et de la vie en valorisant la figure d’un Christ offrant son sang pour sauver l’humanité entraînée dans le péché d’Adam et Eve. Mais on ne saurait négliger l’ambivalence de son principe : le sang est à la fois pur et impur, nocif et bienfaisant. Il illustre un paradoxe anthropologique qui, en tant que tel, est nécessaire à toute construction mythique. (21).

Percival’s sister is the only woman who helps the knights instead of tempting them and preventing the accomplishment of the quest. Furthermore, women in general – and this is the case in the three literary productions – are obstacles in the hero’s quest, or even causes of failure. We have here three texts which have a cyclical structure in common, inserting an original hero who tries to reach the goal established in the text and fails. Then, the real hero is introduced, who will achieve the quest in avoiding making the mistakes which had caused his ancestor’s failure.

The most noticeable example of this didactic ancestor is Lancelot: he was meant to be the one who will find the Grail, he was the purest, the bravest of Arthur’s knights. However, because he committed the sin of flesh, he was not pure anymore and thus the Holy Grail could no longer reveal its secrets to him (*La Quête*, 91). The woman who tempted him and drove him away from the Grail and its revelations of great importance for humanity was Guinevere, King Arthur’s wife. With her, Lancelot lost not only his virginity but all his other qualities, what made him brave, trusted and pure (Walter, 106). Both were “punished”, for Lancelot was sent to exile and condemned to merely catch



glimpses of the Grail he had sought during his entire life and Guinevere ended her days in a convent. At the beginning of *La Quête*, a mysterious ‘Demoiselle’ establishes his new status by commenting: “Vous étiez hier le meilleur chevalier du monde, et qui vous eût appelé ainsi, eût dit vrai; car alors vous l’étiez. Mais qui le dirait maintenant, on le tiendrait pour menteur, car il y a meilleur chevalier que vous” (25). The powerful knight mentioned by the mysterious lady is none other than Galahad.

The same thing happens to Adam in the Bible, he had been given eternal innocence, happiness and well-being by God but because he gave in to Eve’s temptation, he disobeyed the only order God had given him and thus lost everything. Like their Arthurian counterparts, they were both heavily castigated. God said to Eve: “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” and cursed Adam: “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the day of thy life [...] in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread; till thou return unto the ground.” (*The Holy Bible* Genesis 3; 16-19). The original couple was thus expelled from Heaven, condemned along with their line of descent to live the life we know and to be held responsible for this curse cast on humanity since then.

In *Of Mice and Men*, Curley’s wife indirectly pulls the trigger of the gun which will kill Lennie. She appears to be a walking threat in the ranch, and if George is immediately repulsed by her, Lennie is not. On the contrary, he is attracted by her: “Lennie watched her, fascinated.” (33). She will be his Guinevere, his Eve, for he will give up to the temptation of petting her soft hair though George told him: “I seen ‘em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be.” (33). George, the pure hero – worthy counterpart of his counterpart Galahad as we will later see – knows he has to be wary of this woman and warns his friend. However, Lennie gets tempted by her, though he knows George would not agree: “George says I ain’t to have nothing to do with you—talk to you or nothing.” (85). She needs company and thus convinces him that George is just scared by Curley’s reaction if he finds out someone talks to his wife in private, and that Curley being momentarily handicapped by his broken arm, there is nothing to be afraid of. Yet, even if they seem to have a normal conversation at the beginning, she soon crosses the limit in making him feel how her

hair is “soft and fine” (89): Lennie cannot stop stroking her hair harder and harder, and finally breaks her neck. Though he did not go to hide in the bushes as George told him at the beginning of the novel when the puppy dies, he is aware of the gravity of the situation now the girl is dead and leaves the ranch to find the safe spot near the river, where he will die.

Women are thus the triggering factor of failure, being depicted as malignant, tortuous creatures, working for man’s destruction and defeat. But by consequence, a man who proves himself to be able to resist a woman’s tempting is a hero: Jesus’ relationships with women were paternalistic, caring ones, as with Mary Magdalene the prostitute whose sins he forgave. Galahad also resisted women – he freed the Castle of Maidens who then wanted to thank him – for otherwise, he could not have been able to see and learn from the Holy Grail. The only feminine character in Steinbeck’s novel appears to belong to this archaic vision of women, which is the case in his other novels. Women are rather flat characters, almost stereotypes: Curley’s wife is the alluring temptress, Ma Joad embodies the figure of Gaia, a matriarch, a wise and brave woman supporting her family in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Women in Steinbeck’s novels does not seem to be different from the vision of women present in ancient literatures like the Bible or the Arthurian legends, which adds some mythical atmosphere but weakens the psychological realism of the more complex male characters. They thus appear to be evolving among allegories and demonstrate their qualities by contrast with these mythical remnants. Therefore, in *Of Mice and Men*, the hero is defined by his resistance to temptation. This is why the notion of bravery is part of the hero’s attributes, for resisting temptation is a proof of an important mental strength and an admirable iron will. It has thus become a classic motif in epic tales that lack of courage is as despicable as giving up to temptation.

In *Of Mice and Men*, it is Candy, the old man, who represents the previous generation: he failed on account of giving up to temptation too, but not because of women’s. The book introduces the failure due to a lack of resolution. Candy is the embodiment of the worker at the end of his life: broken, tired, and physically diminished. He is the first member of the ranch Lennie and George meet at their arrival and the first depiction of him is eloquent: “the door opened and a tall, stoop-shouldered

old man came in. [...] He pointed with his right arm, and out of the sleeve came a round stick-like wrist, but no hand.” (20). He is the one who introduces them to the different inhabitants of the ranch, giving precious indications and comments on what is important to know about each member (20-30). He thus plays the same role as his counterparts, that is to say directly or indirectly guiding the heroes. Besides, the relationship between Candy and his old dog is as special as the one between George and Lennie: both are friendship relations in an environment where loneliness is everywhere, where making friends is uneasy and unsafe. The boss’ defiance in front of the friendship between two men is eloquent: “Well, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy. I just like to know what your interest is.” (24). Friendship is uncommon in the world of itinerant workers: both friendships are to be destroyed in the book.

Candy’s main mistake resides in the killing of his old dog. The scene takes place the evening following their arrival. The workers are playing cards in the bunk house when a man named Carlson complains about Candy’s dog’s stench. Candy first tries to resist, he defends his dog, but gradually recognizes he has been with him for such a long time he does not notice the smell anymore. Still, he refuses to kill the dog. Carlson gets more and more persuasive, trying to make Candy feel guilty: “Look, Candy. This ol’ dog jus’ suffers hisself all the time.” (45), and then, in order to convince him, he proposes to kill the dog himself: “The way I’d shoot him, he wouldn’t feel nothing.” (46). Finally, Candy gives up: “At last Candy said softly and hopelessly, ‘Awright—take ‘im.’ He did not look down at the dog at all. He lay back on his bunk and crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling.” (48). Because he shrinks from his responsibilities, Candy loses his last remaining reason to exist and his ultimate piece of pride and self-respect. He showed himself incapable of resisting Carlson and above all, to free himself his dog from a poor life. George witnesses the entire scene but does not interpose, he merely tries to lighten the atmosphere when Carlson leaves with the dog, revealing he feels uneasy towards the old man’s lack of objection. The latter will bitterly regret his absence of protest, and George is the only one to know:

Candy said, “George.”

“Huh?”

“I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn’t ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog.” (61).

George does not forget this expression of remorse when he finds Lennie with the dead woman in the barn and then hears the shouting of the workers, led by a furious Curley ready to lynch Lennie.

Candy's mistake thus helps George to promptly take his decision, as hard as it may be. In doing so, George redeems an entire generation of workers who settled for immobility and let others decide of their lot. Lancelot's attraction for Queen Guinevere gave him a son, Galahad, – son of the Fisher King's daughter who changed herself into Guinevere – the only knight to whom the Grail revealed its mysteries. Therefore, the father's mistake was redeemed, for from his sin was born the man who will discover the Grail he has been looking for. Moreover, father and son travel together close to the end of the quest but only Galahad will be allowed to go further. The curse shed on humanity was released when Jesus resisted the devil in the desert (Luke 4:2-13) and found the strength to fight back the tempting idea of running away when at the Golgotha (Matthew 26:39-42), restoring the possibility of redemption since Adam's giving up to temptation. Ancestors thus serve as lessons for their line of descent: Christ, Galahad and George are the real heroes, both resisting women and proving themselves determined.

It has been established previously that George shared numerous characteristics with Christ. It is the case with Galahad too, for the three characters are clearly related. First of all, and in the light of what was last debated, we can notice that both George and Galahad have in common a strong and declared sense of honour and virtue. Warren French noted this aspect in his essay on Arthurian influence and allegory in *Of Mice and Men*: “The one obvious Arthurian hangover is George, who is not only remarkably loyal to his charge – the feeble-minded Lennie – but also remarkably pure.” (French in Bloom 2006, 74). Matarasso reports in her book Pauphilet's reflexions about the importance of virtue in the *Queste*: “la vie morale est tout entière résumée par l'antithèse de la luxure et de la virginité.” (143). This quote sums up the main issue of the tale – Lancelot's sin and failure; Galahad's purity, the reason for his success.<sup>10</sup> Pauline Matarasso backs this

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<sup>10</sup>Galahad is even referred to as “Galahad the Pure” in the Monty Python's film adaptation of the Arthurian cycle “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” (1975). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071853/>. April 2010.

statement up: according to her, the text emphasizes the virginity of Galahad and the ranking of the characters according to their purity of life (143). As for George, he clearly shows a disgust – at least a disinterest – for women, the sexual attraction exerted by them and places like brothels: “Jesus, what a tramp” (33) is his reaction when Curley’s wife leaves the room, and when asked by Whit if he will go with them in town at old Susy’s place – a brothel – answers he might join them but just for a drink, arguing that he and Lennie are “rollin’ up a stake” (53). Besides, he warns Lennie of the potential danger Curley’s wife represents.

Both characters are thus pure in the medieval meaning of the term, that is to say virgin or chaste. Moreover, in their quality of heroes, they know how to resist temptation. This special ability proper to heroes along with their declared will to remain pure is part of the chivalric codes ruling society in the Arthurian tales. Honour, virtue and loyalty are part of the *comitatus*, or social code, shared by the knights of Camelot: the knights have to be loyal to their king but also to their companions, they have to stay pure in order to be able to reach the Holy Grail and to be taught its mysteries. This guide of conduct reminds the reader of the Ten Commandments of the *Bible*: as a matter of fact, the two codes are linked, for they shared the same purpose, that is to say structure society and guide its people’s everyday life through simple instructions. Lancelot fails to respect this *comitatus*: he betrays his sovereign in having an affair with his Queen, and therefore the established order is disrupted, which will lead to years of war.

However, George and his Arthurian counterpart really differ from Christ on one point, the dream. The aim of Galahad’s quest is the Grail, and in that sense it is formative, for he has to prove himself worthy and up to the task. Finding the Grail is the only reason for his existence, his main goal. George’s final goal is the achievement of the Jeffersonian dream of property he shares with Lennie, by saving money in order to be able to buy a farm. That dream and the ritual which goes along with it are the only immutable things left to him, and yet this dream seems unrealizable: “George is a last Galahad, dismounted, armed only with a falling dream, a long way from Camelot” (French in Bloom 2006, 75). French’s sentence makes it clear that for both characters, the goal of their quest is their only reason to live: in Galahad’s case, a prediction has

even been made about him being the Knight Camelot had long been waiting for, who will be the only one to whom the Grail's secrets will be revealed:

La joie fut grande; on fit honneur au chevalier, pensant que c'était celui qui devait accomplir les mystères du Graal, ainsi qu'on pouvait le connaître par l'épreuve du Siège où jamais homme ne s'était assis, avant lui, qu'il ne lui arrivât malheur. (*La Quête*, 20).

George does not have a determined destiny as Galahad does, but he does live for this quest, for when Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife and thus puts an end to the dream at the same time, he admits to Candy that he never quite believed in the farm: "I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would" (93).

The attractive aspect of this dream is revealed in the character of Candy. He attends one of the rituals during which George tells Lennie how the farm will be, adding numerous appealing details, and is immediately interested in the project: "Old Candy turned slowly over. His eyes were wide open. He watched George carefully" (57). This telling of the farm is the most evocative one George ever told: the vision is so real they can almost touch it by reaching their hand out. The three men are groggy-like by the vivid evocation, even the story-teller: "George sat entranced with his own picture. When Candy spoke they both jumped as though they have been caught doing something reprehensible." (59). Candy thus proposes his help and, even more interesting, his savings. This is the climax of the telling: with Candy's money, the dream has never been so close to reality. The three of them are now entangled together, the old with the young, the pure with the weak, and decide to keep it secret so that nobody can interfere – and break the vision. However, when this unity is broken, George knows immediately that his dream is doomed, and so does Candy, though he asks George: "Before George answered, Candy dropped his head and looked down at the hay. He knew." (93). George also knows at this very moment what needs to be done about Lennie. In the following scene, George will have to put to the test one of his chivalric virtues – bravery – while destroying another one: innocence. The strong link that bound together the two main characters of the novel is rather innovative: there is a sense of loyalty in *La Quête's comitatus*, but it concerns all knights, not one in particular. However, in *Of Mice and Men*, George only cares about Lennie, though their friendship is looked at with

suspicion, for making friends was not common in the migrant workers' world presented in the novel. This peculiar aspect of characterization will be dealt with more deeply in the next chapter of our study.

In this part, we have thus examined the influences of the Arthurian cycle on *Of Mice and Men*. These legends had also been the object of several studies, among them Matarasso's chapter on 'Galahad, a figure of Christ'. The two major influences of Steinbeck's book show close links and parallels, which are to be found in their hypertext as well. These are three stories of a quest, whose object differs but whose structure and characterization are similar: the Holy Grail takes various forms but it remains a dream, a vision, a goal for the heroes to reach. Those heroes are named differently but they have in common to redeem their ancestors' mistakes and failures along with a virtuous and brave nature, even the most modern character George, a sort of misfit in a twentieth century society, a misfit who lives with the remains of long time-gone chivalric virtues. A critic named John H. Timmerman even detected some nostalgia from Steinbeck's words:

The Glory of Camelot as a shimmering beacon of moral rectitude in a world blasted and darkened by moral perfidy grew in his [Steinbeck's] mind as an Analogy to America. Reflecting on the disparity between the Arthurian age and his own, Steinbeck wrote to Elia Kazan in 1959 that "the values have got crossed up. Courtesy is confused with weakness and emotion with sentimentality" (Timmerman in George, 2005).

This misunderstood sentimentality Timmerman tackles is the cause of the fall of the dream, as the reader can witness with the failure and death of Lennie, the archetypal misfit character.

## **Part 2**

**Characterization: a path towards progression and self-improvement.**



### ***1) Lennie, the embodiment of George as a child.***

In this part, we will focus on the character of Lennie and the special relationship between George and him. In fact, we have seen that even though George is defined as the hero by his own creator, Lennie plays a less obvious but equally important role in the novel. The link between Candy and his dog and George and Lennie has been studied in the previous part, we will now establish Lennie's animality and childishness.

From the very beginning of Steinbeck's novel, Lennie is described in animalistic terms: "he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws" (4) and later on we can read "[Lennie] drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse" (4). These depictions match a wild though innocent nature, like that of a dog. Indeed, when Curley beats Lennie up, the big man does not hit back, he keeps waiting for George's orders, terrified: "Lennie covered his face with his huge paws and bleated with terror" (63). When George finally unleashes Lennie, the blow is lightning and without mercy: Curley eventually "[stands] crying, his fist lost in Lennie's paw" (64). Lennie appears to be innocent and harmless but he can become dangerous when hurt although not do anything without being given the order to fight back, just like trained animals. This constant and entire faith in George reminds the reader of the kind of blind faith dogs have in their masters, emphasized by the previously mentioned link between the two heroes and their "ancestor" Candy. According to Joseph Fontenrose, the episode of the killing of Candy's dog is one of Steinbeck's dramatic devices (55), and in the same way, Lennie's death is another one. This idea of trust can also be spotted in the childish nature of the big man. He completely depends on George: as the latter explains to Slim, he started to take care of Lennie after his Aunt Clara died, and they "got kinda used to each other after a little while" (40). He seems to live in his own world and his only link to the real one is George. He can't remember what George told him "'Where we goin', George? [...] I forgot,' Lennie said softly. 'I tried not to forget. Honest to God I did, George'" (6). However, he has a sort of selective memory, remembering things or persons linked with primitive needs, like eating:

"You remember Andy Cushman, Lennie? Went to grammar school?"

"The one that his old lady used to make hot cakes for the kids?" Lennie asked.

“Yeah. That’s the one. You can remember anything if there’s anything to eat in it.” (56)

Here, eating, a basic instinct, is linked with pleasant memories. Moreover, he keeps thinking about his current obsession – the rabbits – just as children do. Rabbits are part of the mental world he has built to himself, which George, using more realistic terms calls the “little place” (56), the dream of the farm. He is also constantly seeking George’s approval and reassurance “Look, George. Look what I done” (5), “I can still tend the rabbits, George?” (65). Yet he keeps disobeying George or hiding pets he is not allowed to keep, like the dead mouse (7) or the puppy (43). He behaves the same way a child would, and therefore George embodies authority, telling him what to do, trying to protect him from the consequences of his own unconscious acts. Being a figure of power, George becomes a model for Lennie, and as children willing to dress like their parents, he imitates George in his simplest gestures: “George lay back on the sand and crossed his hands under his head, and Lennie imitated him” (9). Lennie is thus a dependent person requiring George’s complete attention and this sometimes leads to angry outbursts from him.

George keeps complaining aloud about Lennie: “I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail” (9); “When I think of the swell time I could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace”; (14) but he recognizes to Slim – the only person in whom he confides – he feels obliged towards Lennie and even thinks he ought to take care of him. During this confidence, the reader learns the reason why a nervous man like George burdens himself with a dependent companion like Lennie. Before this incident, he used to play jokes on him “ ‘cause he was too dumb to take care of ‘imself’ (41) like the other kids of the neighbourhood did:

“Tell you what made me stop that. One day a bunch of guys was standin’ around up on the Sacramento River. I was feelin’ pretty smart. I turns to Lennie and says, ‘Jump in’. An’ he jumps. Couldn’t swim a stroke. He damn near drowned before we could get him. An’ he was so damn nice to me for pullin’ him out. Clean forgot I told him to jump in. Well, I ain’t done nothing like that no more.” (41)

That day, Lennie’s laughable naivety appeared to be nothing but victimized innocence to George’s eyes. It reveals at the same time George’s sympathizing nature hidden under

a disguise of irritability and frustration, and Lennie's propensity to be harassed because of the way he is.

Lennie is different from the others, for he is mentally retarded. René Girard has theorized this tendency of all-time which consists in the victimization of the persons who tend to be socially, physically or mentally different. According to him, "la différence hors-système terrifie parce qu'elle suggère la vérité du système, sa relativité, sa fragilité, sa mortalité" (1982, 35). Lennie – and the class of people he represents – symbolizes society's flaw, and he is persecuted for that, for being the disturbing mirror of reality. He lives entirely for and in his dream of land and rabbits but paradoxically he is the revealing figure of truth. Girard introduces in his book *La violence et le sacré* the notion of "bouc émissaire", which he develops in his eponymous book. He introduces the theory stating that societies progressed thanks to an unconscious system, the sacrifice of a scapegoat. When society goes through a period of crisis, someone, or a category of people is designated as the culprit without any reason, responsible for everyone else's misfortune. Then, this or these culprits are condemned and killed. It is only after their death that the situation goes back to normal and that eventually and paradoxically, the culprits are thanked and sanctified for having saved the society, hence the rituals and religions (1982, 28). However, though this theory can be applied to myths like *The Odyssey* or to the founding books of the religions like the Bible, we can see that it does not entirely concern *Of Mice and Men*. In fact, two major conditions are not respected: the micro-society depicted in the book does not appear to be in a situation of crisis, even though the story takes place during the Great Depression, this economic problem does not affect the characters and is never mentioned in the novel. Besides, this is a situation the murder of Lennie would not have solved in any way. Moreover, Lennie is not innocent of crime, he *did* kill Curley's wife and is thus responsible for what he is being accused of. And after his death, the story ends, the situation is not said to have been improved, and he is not killed by an angry mob, since his friend George prevented this from happening by killing him first. These are the limits of Girard's theory in the book.

However, we are going to explain the reason why this theory is interesting despite all these divergences from the original pattern of the sacrifice, for apart from

them, Lennie has more in common than it seems with the scapegoat as described by Girard. He is different, as we saw earlier, and this is his major similarity with the usual scapegoat. We have seen his childish innocence was a disarming factor in his relationships: it seems unlikely that he could have been able to commit such a crime, except if he did not know the consequences of such an act, which is the case here. This last point is tackled by Girard, saying that when the crime did happen, “la solution la plus simple consiste à maintenir tels quels les crimes de la victime mais à prétendre qu’ils ne sont pas voulus. La victime a bien fait ce dont on l’accuse mais elle ne l’a pas fait exprès” (1982, 119). We showed that Lennie lives in a mental creation of his own, struggling to remember important things George wants him to keep in mind, and remembering them out of fear of being expelled from the dream of the farm. He is not innocent from the crime he perpetrated but he cannot be held *responsible* for it, which makes him an even more perfect scapegoat, for he is a real murderer.

We will develop further this idea of a more subtle scapegoat, who gives real motives for lynching to the mob. First, the reader witnesses that Curley’s wife is a rather lonely person, feeling neglected by her husband and looking for a somewhat ambiguous friendship with the ranchers: “Think I don’t like to talk to somebody ever’ once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?” (77). She is always looking for her husband in the men’s barracks and therefore, and in doing so, even though she is pretending or not, she is a threat for the ranchers’ job. As many female characters in Steinbeck’s novels, she appears to be either the temptress or the innocent victim in a world of men. In both cases, the fact that she finds herself in the barn with Lennie is not odd, on the contrary, for he seems to be the one she goes along with the best, the two of them sharing this innocence proper to dreamers. The murder of Curley’s wife – or should we call it the ‘accident’ – triggers the anger of the ranchers led by Curley. However, Lennie is not lynched by the mob as Girard’s prototypal scapegoat would be, and the situation after his death does not seem to get back to normal, except if we consider this scheme on a smaller scale, George’s. Indeed, Girard’s theory on how societies progressed thanks to the sacrifices of scapegoats cannot really apply here, but the same theory adapted to the personal level is more conceivable, that is to say how individuals progress thanks to the sacrifice of a part of their inner self – such as them as children.

In fact, the two heroes seem linked together. They have known each other since childhood, they are now travelling together and are inseparable. Moreover, the two characters barely talk to each other in front of the others – not to say never. The only time George reveals some of his previous life before coming to the ranch, he is confiding in Slim, and Lennie is absent. When Lennie talks about himself, he is with Crooks, or later on in the book, with Curley's wife, and George is in town with the other workers. George introduces Lennie and himself to the boss at their arrival at the ranch, and the big man remains quiet as George told him earlier near the river. There is an exception though, the moment when they expose their plans of buying a farm to grow vegetables and rabbits to Candy. This dream is what binds the two heroes together and we saw earlier that this passage is the climax of the dream, the time when it almost comes true, strong enough to allow both heroes to put someone harmless in the confidence. Candy is the first person to witness the magic created by the ritual of the telling of the dream. This one is not only perpetrated by George as we saw, but also by Lennie who takes a more subtle part in it, for he keeps pestering George to carry on. His primitive nature makes him the perfect allegory of the unconscious, whereas George the spokesman represents the conscious part of them. The two characters therefore constitute a complete being. Moreover, everything about Lennie points him out as a burden, starting with his childish nature. When we take this dichotomy further on, it becomes clear that Lennie represents the child George once was and who still plays an important role in his life. George protects Lennie, reassures him, speaks in his place, gives him orders and meanwhile, he seems torn between the adult and the childish part of him. Northrop Frye theorized this idea of duality: according to him, “any duality deriving from a feeling of conflict within oneself can take a *Doppelgänger* form: the soul-body one, the good-evil one, the conscious-unconscious one, the subjective and objective side of a personality being a few examples” (1990, 267). This theory introduces the case of a form of duality due to an inner conflict: this is the case here, and this conflict matches Girard's structure which is necessary for the sacrifice to be efficient, that is to say to solve the crisis – here, to allow George to settle this conflict.

## 2) *Of Mice and Men: the story of George's evolution.*

In the light of what has been established in the previous paragraphs, Steinbeck's novel thus tells the story of a progression, of an improvement, for it narrates the hero's realization of his inner conflict and his struggle to solve it. It relates *Of Mice and Men* to the genre of the novel of education, or *Bildungsroman*. Jerome Hamilton Buckley defines the genre as follows in his *Season of Youth*, quoting Susanne Howe Nobbe : "the Bildungsroman in its pure form has been defined as the 'novel of all-around development or self-culture' with 'a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience'" (13). However, it is difficult to define this genre with precision, for, as explained by Daniel Mortier in a collection of essays directed by Philippe Chardin, "les tentatives menées pour trouver des ressemblances objectives et pertinentes entre les romans rangés parmi les romans d'éducation se sont révélées peu concluantes, comme si le genre n'existait pas" (2007, 264). He justifies this complexity by quoting Jean-Marie Schaeffer's own explanation: according to him, it is "un genre hypertextuel, comprenant des textes qui en imitent ou en transforment d'autres" (264). Schaeffer's statement therefore clarifies the reasons of the controversy, for a genre born from several other genres cannot contain identical works, with easily recognizable common features.

Yet, Florence Bancaud makes out several similarities between three books listed as Bildungsromane in her essay about German Bildungsromane in Chardin's book. According to her, Wieland's *Agathon*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and Moritz's *Anton Reiser* "combinent une perspective intérieure et extérieure: ils tendent à séculariser le roman religieux en en reprenant le schéma de développement individuel, et à psychologiser le roman d'aventures en n'en retenant que ce qui favorise la formation intérieure du héros" (49). This idea of an adaptation of the religious and the adventure novel to a new form of novel emphasizing the hero's inner development reminds the reader of Galahad's adventures, in which Steinbeck found the inspiration for the character of George. Moreover, she tackles the theme of an inner monster living inside the hero: "ce monstre [...] c'est le solipsisme stérile et le culte de passions irrationnelles contraires à l'idéal dynamique de perfectionnement et l'idéal altruiste de l'ouverture à la communauté" (50). This "monster" is embodied by Lennie, the irrational child in

George, whose desires are incompatible with being part of the community and who is thus impeding self-improvement.

This last notion of the hero's propensity to evolve is tackled by Mikhaïl Bakhtin in *Esthétique de la Création verbale*: for him, it is precisely what differentiates the hero of a novel of formation from the hero of an average novel: in the Romanesque genre, "le héros est ce point immobile et immuable autour duquel s'opère toute la dynamique du roman" whereas in the case of the novels of education;

L'image du héros n'est plus une unité statique mais, au contraire, une unité dynamique. Dans cette formule de roman, le héros, son caractère deviennent une grandeur variable. Les changements que connaît le héros acquièrent une signification dans le sujet romanesque qui sera, dès lors, repensé et restructuré (227).

According to Bakhtin, the hero's environment evolves with him. He carries on dividing the genre into five sub-genres: the first two deal with a cyclical temporality. The first sub-genre deals with a formation over a lifetime, the second with a "certain mode de devenir typique, répétitif", like the transition from a dreamy childhood to a disillusioned adulthood (228). The third sub-genre is the biographic type, the fourth one would be the novel of education in the literal sense of the word, that is to say including a didactic dimension, and the fifth one is the most important according to Bakhtin: "l'évolution de l'homme y est indissoluble de l'évolution historique" (229). This last sub-genre would be the "most achieved" form of the novel of formation as Bakhtin sees it, for both units – the hero and his environment – are to evolve, in an indivisible way: "tel est le type ultime du roman de formation, le type réaliste" (230). This last precision is of great importance for our subject: in fact, if we assume *Of Mice and Men* is a novel of formation, we cannot leave apart the fact that Steinbeck is still considered as a realistic novelist and his Californian cycle – *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* – as proletarian novels belonging to socialist realism. Bakhtin's definition therefore reinforces our argument on *Of Mice and Men* sharing the characteristic features of the novel of formation. George's evolution is inseparable from the changing era he lives in, for these years will revolutionize the world of migrant workers. Yet, we will tackle Steinbeck's realism and its limits later.

Bakhtin insists on the need to consider his four other sub-genres along with the realistic type, especially the second (230). Indeed, this kind of novel of formation tends to focus on a typical and repetitive future, like the example of the “adolescent idéaliste et rêveur” who becomes “un adulte désabusé et pratique” given by Bakhtin (228). This definition fits our heroes – for the particularity of this Bildungsroman is to have two protagonists: one as a representation of the hero’s past, who cannot leave the other, who is the adult he became. In fact, George is torn between two desires: he feels – as explained earlier – that he ought to take care of Lennie, that he cannot part from him. He is incapable of letting the child in him go and so cannot become an accomplished adult. At the same time, he keeps on moaning about Lennie being a burden, complaining about the infinitely simpler life which is passing him by because of Lennie. His moroseness has been comprehended as a disguised affection for his friend, a difficulty to put feelings into words. It is not to be questioned that George clearly lacks communication abilities and when it comes to socializing matters, he appears as incapacitated as Lennie. According to Marie-Christine Lemardeley, George needs Lennie to put into acts what he cannot express by himself (1992, 108). However, we cannot forget what George means by these words. He fakes complaining about his friend but this betrays a secret desire, that of belonging to what Florence Bancaud calls “community of men”, to fit into a social category: ““God, you’re a lot of trouble,” said George. ‘I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl’” (9). This aspiration to lead a ‘normal’ life truly reveals George’s inner conflict, as he is torn between a life with Lennie – and therefore taking the risk of having to spend his life running away because of his friend’s nature – and a life on his own, settled down. This inner conflict in George triggers the sacrificial pattern and he will have to solve this crisis by suppressing the person responsible for his struggle: his inner child. He is restrained by his double, this conflict prevents him from learning and practicing the usual codes of communication and thus finally be part of the society of migrant workers.

George’s evolution can remind the reader of primitive initiation rites. Mircea Eliade gave a definition of initiation in *Initiations, rites, sociétés secrètes*: “On comprend généralement par initiation un ensemble de rites et d’enseignements oraux, qui poursuit la modification radicale du statut religieux et social du sujet à initier” (12).



*Of Mice and Men* does not tell the story of two primitives but that of two migrant workers and for this reason George's initiation is not blatantly explicit. However, George does share the teachings undergone by a primitive, except the fact that contrary to him, he is ignorant of the initiation process. Growing up is a turning point in an individual's life and primitive tribes made the passage to adulthood less painful by organizing it. Our societies do not abide by those rituals and let the transition occur unsupervised. According to Mircea Eliade, only one kind of initiation managed to remain real and not merely symbolical: the initiation of puberty. This is what George experiences: "Pour avoir le droit d'être admis parmi les adultes, l'adolescent doit affronter une série d'épreuves initiatiques: c'est grâce à ces rites, et aux révélations qu'ils comportent, qu'il sera reconnu comme un membre responsable de la société" (1959, 12). George therefore has to get rid of Lennie but before – and this is the most important – he has to realize how necessary it is. This process of instruction includes several steps: Simone Vierne distinguishes three parts in the initiation rite: the first one is a preparation to the second one, the initiatory death, and the third one expresses the new birth and its development (13). George is confronted to the society of men in order to comprehend that he has to part from Lennie, as routine as his present situation might be. As said earlier, he already feels his life without Lennie will be different, but he cannot make up his mind to break free. In the ranch, which corresponds to the preparation place, first part of the initiation, he discovers a world different from his own *via* the others' habits, questions and mistakes.

The first – and most striking – situation he faces has to do with sexuality. As we saw while studying his Arthurian counterpart Galahad, George does not share the other workers' interest in sex and women. Ironically, Lennie is fascinated by the allegory of temptation and sex, Curley's wife. However, he is merely astonished by her beauty like a child would be, there is absolutely no lust in his dazed look. George is the only worker who shows disgust towards the young woman. Even Slim, the instructor of George's initiation as we will discuss later does not reject the girl:

"Hi, Slim," she said.

Slim's voice came through the door. "Hi, Good-lookin'."

"I'm trying to find Curley, Slim."

"Well, you ain't tryin' very hard. I seen him goin' in your house." (33).

Slim adopts a paternalistic tone with her, he does not show any fear of being expelled because of her but gently tries to make her understand she has nothing to do in the barracks. Other men only seem embarrassed by her presence for they fear for their job, whereas George really appears repulsed by what she represents. He has the same reaction when Candy tells him why Curley keeps one of his hands in a glove: “That’s a dirty thing to tell around” (29) and later “‘Glove fulla Vaseline,’ George said disgustedly” (34). He also gives an answer reflecting uncertainty and uneasiness to Whit when the rancher asks him to join them to go to Susy’s place, a brothel. He first agrees: “Might go in and look the joint over” (52) but then forswears: “Me an’ Lennie’s rollin’ up a stake [...] I might go in an’ set and have a shot, but I ain’t puttin’ out no two and a half” (53). He shows interest mingled with fear by the idea of going to a brothel – though he might have already been to one – but he keeps saying the same excuse every time he is asked to join activities these men are familiar with, that of the need to save money. Moreover, Steinbeck’s writing does not give any hints about George’s real intentions, on the contrary, it adds uncertainty to it and the reader does not know if George really refuses Whit’s invite to join them because he needs to save some money. Later on, when asked for advices about the theatrical representation of *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck declared in one of his letters: “I like the idea that George might get the girl or at least that he might want to get the girl, this would enrich. And also you might let the girl feel that she might want George—all good and all possible” (54). The doubt arises, though George gives the impression he is really serious about his farm project. We would take his recurrent refusals literally if he did not admit at the end that he never really believed in this dream. Therefore, he unconsciously gives excuses to avoid doing things he is reluctant to do, though these are his fellow workers’ usual hobbies.

The next step of George’s initiation is when he encounters violence. It is made obvious in the passage when Whit insists on George coming with him to see the probable fight, for Curley just went out banging the door after he asked if anybody had seen his wife and learnt Slim was in the barn. Whit appears delighted at the thought of a possible fight:

“I guess maybe I’d like to see this,” he said. “Curley’s just spoilin’ or he wouldn’t start for Slim. An’ Curley’s handy, God damn handy. Got in the finals for the Golden Gloves. He got newspaper clippings about it. [...] I like to see the fuss it comes off. Come on, le’s go.” (54).

George's answer is once again the same: "Lennie and me got to make a stake" (54). Moreover, he discerns from the first time he meets Curley that they can have problems with him. He thus warns Lennie: "You keep away from him, will you? Don't never speak to him. If he comes in here you move clear to the other side of the room" (31). Contrary to Whit, and the other workers, he is not fond of fights and violence in general. As for Lennie, he does not try to avoid fights, violence just scares him. He begs George to protect him after Curley leaves the room: "I don't want no trouble. [...] Don't let him sock me, George" (30). And then wants to leave the ranch out of fear: "Le's go, George. Le's get outta here. It's mean here" (34). The childish Lennie is terrified by this world of men, full of strong impulses proper to adulthood he does not know about, such as violence and sex. However, the two characters react differently when the fight with Curley breaks out:

[Curley] slashed Lennie with his left, and then smashed down his nose with a right. Lennie gave a cry of terror. Blood welled from his nose. "George," he cried. "Make 'um let me alone, George." He backed until he was against the wall, and Curley followed, slugging him in the face. Lennie's hands remained at his sides; he was too frightened to defend himself. George was on his feet yelling, "Get him, Lennie. Don't let him do it." (63).

Lennie is paralyzed by fear though he could – and will – smash him. However, George shows a completely different reaction towards violence. He is no longer reluctant to fight back, on the contrary. Here, George goes through the second phase of his preparation, facing violence. He realizes that the world in which he lives is violent, and that staying paralyzed will not do him any good. After this test, he is ready for his initiatory death.

Simone Vierre uses the image of a seed to explain initiation: "l'initiation est le commencement d'un état qui doit amener la graine, l'homme, à sa maturité, sa perfection. Et, comme la graine, il doit d'abord mourir pour renaître" (7). George therefore has to die in order to be reborn as an initiated, an adult. Here however, because of this dualism, only one part of George has to die to let the other part grow. Lennie is the problematic part, preventing George from taking up his personality, and is the part of George which has to die. In Girard's myths, the innocent responsible is lynched by a crowd, paradoxically enabling this very same crowd to be redeemed. At the individual level, nobody but the person concerned by the inner conflict needs to kill the scapegoat.

This is where the lesson learnt from the ancestors happens to be useful: in fact, Candy's bitter regret when his old dog was killed by another was not forgotten by George. For the sacrifice to be efficient and redeeming he has to perpetrate it himself, though it would be easier to let others solve his conflict. In fact, it appears that killing Lennie is the most arduous act George had to do in his entire life. It is obviously his friend he is about to shoot, and knowing he is the only one who ought to do it makes the sacrifice even more heart-rending for him. He knows if he does not accomplish what happens to be his duty, Lennie will be lynched by the scared and furious ranchers or sent to an asylum, though he tries to convince himself locking Lennie up will be the best thing to do: "Maybe they'll lock 'im up an' be nice to 'im" (93). However, Candy and then Slim make him realize that it is not possible: "If we could keep Curley in, we might. But Curley's still mad about his hand. An' s'pose they lock him up an' strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain't no good, George" (96). The reader knows George is merely trying to avoid doing something deeply painful, for he answers Slim: "I know" (96).

The critic Warren French adds another explanation to this reluctance: "Steinbeck makes it clear that George has tremendous difficulties bringing himself to destroy Lennie, although Lennie will not even know what has happened. What George is actually trying to kill is not Lennie, who is only a shell and a doomed one at that, but something in himself" (1961, 75). Moreover, George knew he will have to kill him from the moment he asked Candy to pretend he just found the girl to give him time to go in the bunk house so "the guys won't think [he] was in on it" (94). He seizes the opportunity to take Carlson's Luger – the same gun which shot Candy's old dog – to bring it to the spot by the river where he knows he will find Lennie. From this moment, George has set the sacrificial process in motion, even though he will have to restrain himself from running away.

French's theory emphasizes the killing as a resolution of an inner conflict. George kills Lennie and in doing so, he frees himself from his last remnant of childhood. His act makes him become a fully grown adult, as explained by French: "Because of their relationship, George has actually been able to remain as much a "kid" as Lennie; shooting him matures George in more than one way" (French in Bloom 2006, 77). *Of Mice and Men* is therefore the story of George's progress and evolution

towards adulthood, as Charlotte Hadella mentions in *Of Mice and Men: a kinship of powerlessness*, “not until Lennie’s death is George free to join the community of men represented by Slim” (61). Indeed, after having come down to the same spot everything began, he climbs up to the road with Slim’s help after having done what he ought to do (106). The spot here bears the symbolical meaning of a womb, as Simone Vierende noticed, quoting Paracelse in Eliade’s *Naissances Mystiques*: “Celui qui veut entrer au royaume de Dieu doit premièrement entrer avec son corps dans sa mère, et là, mourir” (30). George’s inner child’s death thus occurs at the very same place the story began, for the initiation rite to be completed and George to be reborn. This notion of rebirth is present in numerous forms of initiations in the primitive tribes, and the shaman is the one who welcomes the new initiate when he comes out. Here, it is Slim who helps George climb back up.

Slim has a special role at the end of *Of Mice and Men*: he is to be the only person to understand what George has been through. The others’ reaction, being also the last words of the book is manifest: “Curley and Carlson looked after them. And Carlson said, “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” (106). This last intervention helps the reader to understand Steinbeck’s word about his character “George is a hero, and only heroes are worth writing about” (Steinbeck and Wallsten, 563). In fact, George’s act erects him at the same level as his biblical and Arthurian counterpart: he resisted temptation and sacrificed a part of himself in order to solve his conflict. The difficulty here resided in the fact that he had to do it himself. He had to choose, just like Jesus had to choose to drink the cup of wine with venom to the dregs or Galahad to remain pure and virtuous. Besides, it shows that George’s inner conflict was not perceptible to any average rancher, which will lead us to study the character of Slim, who seemed to have understood the struggle George underwent from the very moment he met the heroes.

### ***3) The figure of the Guide: Slim.***

If George is a novice, there is inevitably someone in the book who takes on the role of the instructor. Simone Vierende makes it clear:

Le novice est amené à sa nouvelle naissance par un guide qui possède déjà, par sa ou ses initiations antérieures, une partie du pouvoir, du dépôt sacré qu'il a la charge de lui transmettre. Il est aussi remarquable que ce guide, surtout lorsque les initiations ont gardé un symbolisme plus net de naissance, est considéré comme le second père (62).

In Steinbeck's novel, Slim assumes this position, though he is not the boss, for this one would have been expected to have a paternalistic behaviour because of his status. However, it appears that Slim is not like any worker: the first description of him is made by Candy at the heroes' arrival, and he is indirectly compared to Curley, a much more prominent figure of the ranch since he is the boss' son: "Slim's a jerkline skinner. Hell of a nice fella. Slim don't need to wear no high-heeled boots on a grain team" (29). Disdain shows through the old man's words, for he despises Curley and his inferiority complex even though he has his own failures. Moreover, later on in the novel, Curley himself shows Slim respect mingled with fear:

Curley said, "Well, I didn't mean nothing, Slim. I just ast you."

Slim said, "Well, you been askin' me too often. I'm getting' God damn sick of it. If you can't look after your own God damn wife, what you expect me to do about it? You lay offa me."

"I'm jus' tryin' to tell you I didn't mean nothing," said Curley. "I jus' thought you might of saw her." (62).

It is made clear by Steinbeck that even though Curley is the owner of the ranch, he does not the one exerting authority, nor is his father, the "boss" – the latter is present only once in the novel, at the heroes' hiring.

When the heroes meet Slim, they first hear his voice talking to Curley's wife. Slim is heard before being seen, which enhanced this impression of greatness and majesty, reinforced by the impressive depiction of him:

A tall man stood in the doorway. He held a crushed Stetson hat under his arm while he combed his long, black, damp hair straight back. Like the others he wore blue jeans and a short denim jacket. When he had finished combing his hair he moved into the room, and he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leaders. He was capable of killing a fly on the wheeler's butt with a bull whip without touching the mule. (34)

Steinbeck's portrayal is quite cinematic: Slim's entrance is of western proportions. Yet, he is dressed like the others, a tiny detail which keeps him linked to his fellow workers. The lexical field of royalty is set as the only appropriate set of words to qualify Slim. The list of his feats which follows reminds the reader of the Arthurian legends and their lists of appreciative adjectives to depict the glorious deeds of a noble knight. Slim is thus represented as a royal character, who inspires respect. Royal power is a recurrent theme in initiations tales, such as mythologies. Mircea Eliade explains the importance of sovereignty in the Arthurian legends: "A la fin de leur Quête, les héros guérissent la mystérieuse maladie du Roi et, ce faisant, régénèrent le « Gaste Pays » ; ou même accèdent eux-mêmes à la Souveraineté. Or, on sait que la fonction de la Souveraineté est généralement solidaire d'un rituel initiatique" (265). Slim is a formative character before being an initiator, for he represents the model, the achieved man.

We know his status thanks to the previous description but also by the way the other men behave in his presence: "There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love" (34). Slim is the real master of the ranch. Indeed, the men tend to despise Curley, but the skinner is respected: Carlson even steps back to let him precede him (37). The most striking example though is the execution of Candy's old stinky dog: Candy tries to resist Carlson's insisting arguments for the killing of the dog. However, Carlson eventually turns towards Slim to ask him if he would give Candy one of his dog's puppies, in a final attempt to convince the old swamper:

"I bet Slim would give you one of them pups to raise up, wouldn't you, Slim?"

The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. "Yeah," he said. "You can have a pup if you want to." He seemed to shake himself free for speech. "Carl's right, Candy. That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I got old an' a cripple."

Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim's opinions were law. (46).

Slim's answer is not a feckless one. He has been 'studying' the situation and is now delivering his wise judgment, which everyone is going to respect. In this way Slim is similar to the biblical King Solomon, renowned for his infallible sense of justice. His sentences are wise and proverbial: "Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella"; "Take a real smart guy and he ain't hardly ever a nice fella" (41). Like his counterpart, he is

obeyed even in his most inflexible decisions, even when he does not say a word: “Candy looked a long time at Slim to try to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none. At last Candy said softly and hopelessly, ‘Awright—take ‘im.’” (48). However, he is not unnecessarily cruel and tries to bring some relief after this decision he knows to be hard to resign to by trying to lighten the atmosphere, or reassuring Candy that he will give him one of his puppies. Anyhow, he would appear to be cruel to the reader if he did not show compassion, even regret in front of Candy’s silent collapse: “Candy lay still, staring at the ceiling. Slim gazed at him for a moment and then looked down at his hands; he subdued one hand with the other, and held it down” (49). This reaction reveals another aspect of Slim’s personality. He seems to be someone who has been given a heavy responsibility, that of taking care of his fellow human beings.

Slim thus takes on the role of a divine creature like angels, whose mission on earth is to watch for the others. This particular feature is reinforced by his portrayal:

This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. His hatchet face was ageless. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought. His hands, large and clean, were as delicate in their action as those of a temple dancer. (34).

Steinbeck depicts him as an ageless, omniscient man. He is a rancher, but his hands do not seem to be hurt by years of hard work. He is part of them, for he dresses like them, but all of them intimately feel they ought to respect him, without any social rank to justify this deference. Thus, more than royal powers, he bears a divine aura. His omniscience, a key feature of his special role, is recurrent and embodied by his piercing eyes: “Slim looked through George and beyond him” (36), “Slim’s eyes were level and unwinking” (42), “his calm eyes followed Lennie out the door” (44) and, an even more explicit sentence: “George looked over at Slim and saw the calm, Godlike eyes fastened on him” (41). Slim’s eyes seem to be God’s mirror on his creatures, calm, wise and all-seeing. The skinner’s divine dimension makes him God’s envoy, Eliade’s superhuman being (1959, 276), sent on Earth to initiate the novice.

There are some clues which indicate to the reader Slim is more to George than a mere fellow worker. As soon as they meet, Slim does not sit near George: “Slim sat down on a box across the table from George” (35) like a teacher sits opposite his pupils,



revealing a difference between master and apprentice. They sit at the same place when shortly after their arrival, Slim sets about getting to know George (39). He appears to be “taming” the nervous and suspicious little man: he shows nothing but softness, quiet understanding (35), as if George threatened to slip away at the first sudden move or abrupt word. He adopts a “friendly tone”, inviting “confidence without demanding it” (36). This idea of taming a wild animal is present throughout the novel. Slim uses subtle words and technics to make George talk about his relationship with Lennie and thus to help him gently realize how much his situation needs to change. He knows when he needs to make himself invisible, so George can be free to speak: “Slim moved back slightly so the light was not on his face. ‘Funny how you an’ him string along together.’ It was Slim’s calm invitation to confidence” (40). At first, George reacts defensively but Slim knows how to appease him so towards the middle of their dialogue, he completely trusts the skinner and starts confiding in him: “George fell silent. He wanted to talk. Slim neither encouraged nor discouraged him. He just sat back quiet and receptive” (40) and later on: “George’s voice was taking on the tone of confession” (41). And Slim’s patient listening pays, for he learns what is preventing George from becoming a man:

“I ain’t got no people,” George said. [...] “Course Lennie is a God damn nuisance most of the time,” said George. “But you get used to goin’ around with a guy an’ you can’t get rid of him.” (42)

George confesses to Slim his inner aspiration and at the same time his greatest fear, that of being alone like other migrant workers, free to live the life he wants but desperately alone. After George’s confession, Lennie bursts into the room with the puppy, trying to hide it from George. Slim’s reaction reveals he now knows every aspects of George: “‘Jesus,’ he said. ‘He’s jes’ like a kid, ain’t he.’” (44). His question is more a statement than a real question, for he knows what is inevitably going to happen and thus what part of him George will need to get rid of in order to reach his mute aspiration.

The moment following Lennie’s murder of Curley’s wife is the second time Slim really steps in George’s initiation, for it is the moment when his novice fights temptation and faces death. He kindly but firmly puts into words what George already knows, so that he cannot avoid admitting it:

Slim turned quietly to George. "I guess Lennie done it, all right," he said. "Her neck's bust. Lennie coulda did that."

George didn't answer, but he nodded slowly. His hat was so far down on his forehead that his eyes were covered.

Slim went on, "Maybe like that time in Weed you was tellin' about."

Again George nodded. (95)

He also helps George to accept what needs to be done when the latter tries to plead to save Lennie but Slim reasons with him "That ain't no good, George" (96). The skinner is back to supervise George's painful rebirth, reassuring him about the legitimacy of what he just did: "Never you mind," said Slim. "A guy got to sometimes." (105). He stays close to him until they come back up on the road, never asking any questions contrary to the others, for he is the only one who can understand what George has just been through. The latter looks exhausted and disillusioned:

He looked steadily at his right hand that had held the gun. Slim twitched George's elbow. "Come on, George. Me an' you'll go in an' get a drink."

George let himself be helped to his feet. "Yeah, a drink."

Slim said, "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda. Come on with me." He led George into the entrance of the trail and up toward the highway.

Curley and Carlson looked after them. And Carlson said, "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?" (106).

Slim legitimates George's act, and welcomes him in the world of men by inviting him to get a drink, a symbol of his new belonging to the society of the migrant workers. Carlson and Curley's reaction reinforces George's new status, associating him with Slim, but also noticing the latter's dejection, a new feeling in the guides' world. This last sentence closes the book, and sheds a more human light on those sent to initiate men. Eliade depicted these creatures as the "spiritual elites" of ancient societies: "Leur fonction est de révéler aux nouvelles générations le sens profond de l'existence et de les aider à assumer la responsabilité d'être un « homme véritable », et, par conséquent, de participer à la culture" (1959, 277). These men have been respected, feared, and idolized but there never was any hint of what they could feel. Steinbeck's ending shows that even these divine envoys are subjected to the torments of human existence, for he suggests that these masters' all-time responsibility is now a burden for them. Slim's task as an illusion-killer weighs upon him. George is now part of the society represented by

Slim and the other men but Slim also appears to get more human each time he makes a dream vanish, for the last paragraph depicts him as despondent as George is. The answer to Carlson's question is thus "reality", a crude, inescapable and formative reality, without which life is impossible.

We have been through the study of the three main characters and it reveals that Steinbeck paid much attention to characterization in *Of Mice and Men*. There are in fact two characters, George and Slim, for the third one, Lennie, is the problematic part of George, so important that he had to be personified. These two heroes are the only protagonists needed for an initiation to take place: the novice and his instructor. The rest of the ranchers are part of George's initiation. We thus have every component of a novel of formation, from the inner conflict triggering the departure to the obstacles encountered by the hero during the achievement of his quest.

Yet, *Of Mice and Men* differs from the usual *Bildungsroman*, for the ending is left incomplete: what was the purpose of such an unclear, almost unfinished conclusion? He allowed uncertainty to persist, and this double-ending will be the subject of our third part: we will aim at determining if this ending really is an achievement or a renunciation, whether it is a kind of James Barrie-like pessimistic view of what growing up means or whether it is the story of the success of a quest.

## **Part 3**

### **The end of the initiation**

### ***1) The end: towards a new beginning?***

Steinbeck's end bears different meanings, for, as we saw earlier, the novel ends suddenly and there is no further development of the consequences of George's act. We do not witness the setting up of George's pacified life, for he has just solved his inner conflict. This abrupt ending can thus suggest to the reader that *Of Mice and Men* is a rather pessimistic tale about the childish worthlessness of dreams and expectations.

In fact, Steinbeck's novel can be seen as the bitter report of the human condition: humanity was born when the original couple was expelled out of Eden and is bound to live a life of pain and hard work while expecting to find Heaven in the afterlife. Louis Owen is one of the critics who wrote about the serious pessimism radiating from *Of Mice and Men*. According to him, "there are no Edens in Steinbeck's writing, only illusions of Eden, and in the fallen world of the Salinas Valley, [...] the Promised Land is an illusory and painful dream" (101). The dream of the farm is at the core of the emanating pessimism, at the verge of nihilism. Crooks appears to be the herald of this impossible happiness, for he reinforces the biblical curse cast on humanity by revealing the inter-generational aspiration of migrant workers:

"I seen hundreds of men come by the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' 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. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'" (73).

Besides, he draws the parallel himself between the ranchers' dream and heaven. For him, none of them can be reached on Earth. Crooks repeats his warning several times during the dialogue: "You guys is just kiddin' yourself. You'll talk about it a hell of a lot, but you won't get no land. You'll be a swamper here till they take you out in a box. Hell, I seen too many guys" (75), and after Candy's protest: "Jesus, I seen it happen too many times. I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand" (75). Crooks associates the three men and their aspirations with many generations of ranchers who failed to achieve this dream of property. He is the witness of these men's history, the mere observer of their struggles and misfortunes, and he does not seem to have any expectations, or does not share them. He contents himself

with convincing Lennie and Candy they are deluding themselves with illusions, saying that George is in town at the moment, spending their money (75). He thus desperately tries to convince them their dream is doomed, and sheds a gloomy and hopeless atmosphere which contrasts with the two men's enthusiasm.

However, his skepticism vanishes when he learns they have almost all the money needed for the purchase. The farm stops being a vague plan to become real, and Crooks offers the men his help at the farm. For a moment, he gives up his views and forgets all the aborted dreams he has seen in his life to share the others' excitement. Then, Curley's wife comes in and reminds him of his condition: a black cripple. This is why the chapter ends with Crooks' withdrawal from the plan: "I didn' mean it. Jus' foolin'. I wouldn' want to go no place like that'" (82). Crooks goes back to his routine, that of a lonely man, rubbing his aching back with liniment. Dreams of property are not for men like him, as Curley's wife reminded him. He is aware of his fate and though he shared their dream for a while, reality brings him to his senses. Men like him ought to remain on their own, even though they fear loneliness as other migrant workers do, as showed by Crooks' and George's comments: "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That 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" (41); "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make a difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," he cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick'" (72). The city's name 'Soledad' – 'loneliness' in Spanish – reveals this is a real plague among the ranchers, though inescapable. Crooks is thus the best example of the ambient pessimism present in *Of Mice and Men*, for he realizes by himself the condemned aspect of this dream. The only persons who actually believe in the plan of the farm are Lennie, a retarded person, and Candy, an old dreamy man. We can thus see that this plan is far from a realistic and achievable project, for only outcasts have faith in it.

Crooks could fill in the profile of the pariah but he has kept a keen sense of rationality: he is just disillusioned, for as he says, he has seen too many men chasing the hope of being the owners of some land one day. The access to property is not for their kind, and their dream is doomed from the beginning, as Lennie's weakness is a constant threat. For these men, there is no access to a kind of heaven on earth: they are to remain

lonely wanderers, spending their wages in whorehouses or casinos instead of saving money to escape their fate. The sudden end of the novel can be understood as the corroboration of this ageless scheme: Lennie makes a mistake and it is the end of this dream of property, George ends up on his own, like the other workers, and goes to spend his money in a bar with Slim. Pessimism and disillusionment are omnipresent moods in the novel, reinforced by the tragic ending. Moreover, two out of the three characters who actually believe their dream can or could have been achievable die at the end, because of their aspirations. Curley's wife wanted to be an actress and thus paraded in the ranch, trying to seduce the men, pretending to be looking for her husband, taking poses in doorways in a cinematographic manner. She had had to abandon her Hollywood aspirations but was still missing her aborted career, thus behaving like a failed actress, triggering the tragic end of her dramatic life. Lennie, who was unaware of the codes ruling the society he lived in and had the mind of a child in a giant's body, had a passion for stroking smooth things, dead or alive, from mice to girls including puppies. He accidentally killed Curley's wife while petting her soft hair and brought the dream to an end by doing so. The death of these two dreamers helps producing a diffuse feeling of disillusion, hence the pessimistic general tone.

However, we have seen that George's progression shared many characteristics with rites of initiation. An instruction such as George's does not bear a pessimistic dimension, on the contrary, it is usually the official occasion for improvement. The failure is not an end, as George-Albert Astre observes in *Steinbeck ou le rêve contesté*, but a way to transfigure the hero, for according to him "l'évocation de l'échec succédant inévitablement au songe et métamorphosant pourtant sa victime en homme véritable" is one of the major themes in Steinbeck's novels (31). Therefore, even though the deeply pessimistic aspect of the novel is not to be left out, the notion of progression implicates a rather optimistic goal, that of personal development. George ends up accepting the bitter reality we developed earlier: property is not accessible to migrant workers like him. If we put an end to the analysis here, *Of Mice and Men* indisputably is a pessimistic novel about doomed dreams which had been confronted with an inflexible way of living and a divided society, which we will deal with later on. Yet, George's realization goes farther and this is how he improves: he consciously sacrifices his dreams instead of suffering the gradual awareness of the impossibility to own a piece of

land as Crooks did. He becomes conscious of the vicious circle Lennie is at the centre of, as illustrated by Owens: “When Lennie dies, the theological dream of the Edenic farm dies with him, for while Lennie’s weakness doomed the dream it was only his innocence that kept it alive” (104). Thus, by killing Lennie, George not only sacrifices his inner child but also the dream. But rather than condemning his evolution, it allows him to come back up to the road, metamorphosed.

Moreover, loneliness is no longer a burden and a danger when it is accepted and recognized as useful, as George does at the end. In his case, company was problematic but he feared loneliness, for he had witnessed its ravages. The end shows a lonely George, though he is accompanied by Slim: we can rename it “independence”, for he strikes a balance between his poisonous association with Lennie and a total abrupt solitude. George’s initiation helps him to overcome his previous fears and find a solution to the problems his new situation might cause. He is now independent but not alone, thus not prone to let his nervous and impulsive nature gain the upper hand. The initiation rite George goes through carries an optimistic message, that of revealing improvement is possible even for those who do not really fit the common description of the hero: he is an outcast, a migrant worker; does not travel with a reliable and supportive person but with a child he has to take care of and whose mischiefs he has to cover up.

However, according to Louis Owens, this relationship “breaks the pattern of wandering and loneliness imposed upon the outcasts”: Owens sees the two men as a challenge to the biblical curse, their dream being their commitment (102). We would rather say that instead of a challenge – for this word bears a strong pessimistic sense because of its final failure – George’s initiation is an acceptance. In fact, considering the story from this new angle changes everything: George is no longer the dreamer ‘growing up’ and opening his eyes on the tough reality of life, but the novice who at the end of his initiatory path towards consciousness voluntarily accepts his humanity. The critic Warren French illustrated it in his work *John Steinbeck: “Of Mice and Men is not a tragedy but a comedy about the triumph of the indomitable will to survive. This is a story [...] of man’s painful conquest of his nature and of his difficult, conscious rejection of his dreams of greatness and acceptance of his own mediocrity”* (1961, 76).



The word 'conscious' here is the fundamental difference with Crooks' passive and imposed acceptance. George experiences humility rather than facing an oppressive reality. In accepting what French calls his 'mediocrity', he is set above the other ranchers, though they all end up the same way: lonely and unable to break out of the social class they belong to.

*Of Mice and Men* thus bears an optimistic dimension mingled with pessimism: Steinbeck makes his hero tackle life right on, he discovers reality and gives up childish dreams but does not stop there, merely disappointed: he is now entirely part of the community of migrant workers led by Slim and benefits from this new status, free to choose how he wants to live. Choice is a determining feature in the positive aspects of George's initiation: he has made the **choice** to free himself from Lennie, who represented as French said 'his dreams of greatness', and is therefore able to choose his path, or for instance the way he wants to spend his wages, since the dream vanished. We have seen earlier he shared the itinerant workers' fear of loneliness: yet, paradoxically, he is less lonely after Lennie's death than before, for Lennie's presence prevented him from developing any close bonds with the other workers. After his death and the dream's, he is no longer tied up by this need for savings, and can take a decision for himself on his own. This clever combination of pessimism and optimism towards society raises the issue of utopia and its opposite; dystopia.

In fact, George's initiation can also be considered as the difficulty to progress from a condition to a better one, hence the questioning of the American society at that time. In order to determine what Steinbeck's aim in his criticism of the American dream is – for Astre, among other critics, agrees on the fact that *Of Mice and Men* criticizes the American dream –, we need to make out which is the society he condemns and which is his enhanced suggestion, if there is one.

## ***2) Steinbeck's dystopia***

We have noticed this constant balance between optimism and pessimism in Steinbeck's novel. These opposite atmospheres tend to create a persistent feeling of embarrassment, reinforced, as we saw, by the violent ending. This end marks the death

of the dream of the farm, which bore many common characteristics with utopia, and heaven: “lieu idéal” (Trousson 2010, 21); “positif, regarde vers l’avenir [...], propose l’organisation d’une société heureuse fondée sur la perfection institutionnelle” (Trousson 1998, 23) are as many terms linking George and Lennie’s dream with utopia. Raymond Trousson in his book *D’Utopie et d’Utopistes* defines the latter as follows : “essentiellement humaniste ou anthropocentrique, dans la mesure où [...] elle fait l’homme maître de son destin” (22). The farm project represents this dream of a better and fairer society, where men are equals. However, in Steinbeck’s novel, this utopia is to be finally killed by its own creator, suggesting to the reader that the solution has to be found somewhere else.

The telling of the farm project is very ritualized, as we examined earlier. George tells the dream three times, once every day. He first tells it to Lennie, for this one is asking for it, like a child asking for a bedtime story:

“O.K. 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——”

“An’ live off the fatta the lan’,” Lennie shouted. “An’ have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we’re gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George.” [...]

“Well,” said George, “we’ll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire in the stove and set around it an’ listen to the rain comin’ down on the roof—Nuts!” He took his pocket knife, “I ain’t got time for no more.” (16).

This first occurrence provides the dream with precise details, adding realism to the vision. It also refers to a notion of prosperity – the thick cream on the milk –, present in many utopias. This is the end of the fear of lacking vital supplies but also the achievement of the desire for abundance. The most important element in this first telling of the dream is the longing for being their own bosses, revealed when George mentions the rainy days. It is the first occurrence of an element present in utopias as well, showing to the reader what the purpose of this dream is, for it is not merely created in order to offer a way to escape from reality: it also bears a social issue, meaning that the two characters – and especially George, for he is the creator of this utopia – are not satisfied with their lot and aim at better living conditions. These two major ideas

presented here – prosperity and work as a pleasure – are common in utopias’ ideal societies. These aspects are developed further on towards the middle of the novel, when Candy offers his help on the future farm. This is also, as we have seen, the most realistic telling: the characters are “entranced” (59) by the intensity of the picture. Besides, the dream gets closer to achievability.

“I could build a smoke house like the one gran’pa had, an’ when we kill a pig we can smoke the bacon and the hams, and make sausage an’ all like that. An’ when the salmon run up the river we could catch a hundred of ‘em and salt ‘em down or smoke ‘em. We could have them for breakfast. They ain’t nothing so nice as smoked salmon. When the fruit come in we could can it—and tomatoes, they’re easy to can. Ever’ Sunday we’d kill a chicken or a rabbit. Maybe we’d have a cow or a goat, and the cream is so God damn thick you got to cut it with a knife and take it out with a spoon. [...] All kin’s a vegetables in the garden, and if we want a little whisky we can sell a few eggs or something, or some milk. We’d jus’ live there. We’d belong there. There wouldn’t be no more running round the country and getting’ fed by a Jap cook. No sir, we’d have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house” (57).

George’s narrative reveals a notion of happiness related to childhood, for he mentions the smoke house his grand-father had. Childhood refers to a state of innocence and carefree well-being, which is what the men are seeking. The smoke house also alludes to the biblical dream of the Promised Land, founder of the United States. In fact, back to the Age of Discovery, the American continent stimulated the minds of those who dreamt of a new and pure society: as demonstrated by Raymond Trousson in his work about utopia, “l’Amérique, terre sans passé, table rase idéale pour toutes les expériences, sera très tôt aussi terre d’élection des tentatives de réalisations utopiques” (86). New civilizations are discovered, like the Incas, and they are fascinating, for they seem to be survivors of a golden age: they despise gold and precious metals, live in egalitarian communities and the concept of ownership does not exist (82). Such travel accounts encourage disillusioned utopists looking for a place to set their aspirations. Indeed, according to Trousson, the European monarchies and their systems do not satisfy these people anymore: “l’Amérique s’oppose [...] à la corruption européenne, comme sa simplicité vertueuse aux raffinements superflus des sociétés civilisées” (89). This led to a process of conquest and settlement motivated by vision of vast and unexplored lands, “terre de liberté et d’entreprise, de tolérance et d’équité” (94). The dream of the farm in

*Of Mice and Men* bears important similarities with the first settlers' dream of propriety in a calm and limitless continent.

The reason for the first pioneers' settling was, for some of them, the fall of the hopes and illusions they had placed in European societies; for others, an escape from persecutions and an opportunity to start their life over again in a completely new environment, far from Europe. In Steinbeck's novel, we can see that the characters have more or less the same motives and expectations. They too want to decide for their own selves, to live free, to have access to property and never to be under restraint again, as demonstrated by the sequel of the last quoted passage telling George's aspirations:

“It ain't enough land so we'd have to work too hard. Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn't have to buck no barley for eleven hours a day. [...] An' it'd be our own, an' nobody could can us. If we don't like a guy we can say, 'Get the hell out', and by God he's got to do it. An' if a fren' come along, why we'd have an extra bunk, an' we'd say, 'Why don't you spen' the night?' an' by God he would. [...] S'pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball game, or any damn thing. [...] We wouldn' ask nobody if we could. Jus' say, 'We'll go to her,' an' we would. Jus' milk the cow and sling some grain to the chickens an' go to her.” (59-61).

Here, the access to choice and a less wearying job are emphasized. Freedom is the main determining factor, the one which makes George fascinated about that project until its telling becomes a ritual, almost religious. It is also what bewitches Candy and Crooks when they attend one of these rituals, so they immediately offer their help, as modest as it is. This sudden urge to be part of such a dream reveals the lack of human contact among these migrant workers, but it is even more the harsh observation of the results of an individualized society. Jacques Cabau commented on this need to plan something with someone else, describing – not without any hint of pessimism – “un univers sans amour, où la seule lueur n'est pas l'amitié, mais la solidarité des boeufs sous le joug” (1966, 32). Therefore, the reader can see that the utopian characteristics of the dream are just the visible part of the iceberg, for a utopia is created in opposition to a society the author wishes to criticize.

Moreover, the last occurrence of the dream is pitiful: George is telling it for the last time to an insouciant Lennie he is about to sacrifice. This version of the telling is

hesitating, awkward, radically opposite from the one we have just studied, which is the climate of the novel. This last evocation is asked by Lennie, as always: “Tell me like you done before” (102). George is pausing, hesitant, even when he finally makes up his mind:

George had been listening to the distant sounds. For a moment, he was business-like. “Look across the river, Lennie, an’ I’ll tell you so you can almost see it.” [...] “We gonna get a little place,” George began. [...] George raised the gun and his hand shook, and he dropped his hand to the ground again.

“Go on,” said Lennie. “How’s it gonna be. We gonna get a little place.”

“We’ll have a cow,” said George. “An’ we’ll have maybe a pig an’ chickens...an’ down the flat we’ll have a little piece alfalfa—”

“For the rabbits,” Lennie shouted.

“For the rabbits,” George repeated. (104).

This last telling shows the dream is fading away, killed with the only person who actually believed in it. In fact, George admits having been convinced by it, for Lennie kept asking for him to tell it, but never to have really believed in it; Candy showed a strong will to believe in the possible achievement of the plan but he ends up realizing he has merely been fooling himself and the reader last sees him his head on his hands, bent down over Curley’s wife body, mourning his defeated hopes. As for Crooks, the more down-to-earth character, he withdraws from the project shortly after he applied for it, for in the meanwhile, Curley’s wife reminded him of his condition. These characters have in common to be longing for a freedom they can only reach by climbing the social ladder, which seems to be impossible, as Curley’s wife example witnesses.

The dream of the farm is at the core of *Of Mice and Men*, but it is not about it. This dream is used as a way to reveal the society’s flaws, since it describes a perfect society in opposition to the actual one, which is the aim utopias are seeking to achieve. However, we cannot call *Of Mice and Men* a utopia, for there is a strong realistic aspect in Steinbeck’s book. A term derived from utopias and which happens to be their direct opposition, ‘dystopias’, would be more appropriate, for a dystopia sets its scenario in a nightmarish society it wants to castigate. The utopian dream in *Of Mice and Men* prevents us from indubitably categorizing the novel in this genre and situates it in

between the two opposite genres. Yet, we will not deal with these linguistic matters but with the aspects raised by these genres and what Steinbeck condemns in his society.

M. Keith Booker's definition of dystopia in the introduction of his volume dedicated to dystopian literature reveals the importance of the genre as a reassessment of a society:

Dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions (3).

We have seen previously that George and Lennie's dream presents similarities with the first pioneers' vision of America, which we have established as a utopia. However, as said before, this dream is not achieved in *Of Mice and Men*, it fails. Some critics saw the author's disillusion in this story, such as George-Albert Astre who placed Steinbeck in a particular state, "[une] phase de tristesse lucide qui succède aux illusions sans mesure" (1963, 56). However, more than a mere progressive realization, similar to that of his hero, Steinbeck's end telling the failure of a utopian dream might raise some questions about what motivated him to write such a disenchanting story.

In fact, we know that even though Steinbeck never considered himself as a socialist, he was criticizing what the American dream had become while he was writing *Of Mice and Men* (Astre 1963, 71). He witnessed the effects of the 1929 Crash on the proletarian class and the Great Depression, which led him to wonder about the progress made since the first settlements and the Declaration of Independence. Raymond Trousson mentions the turnaround of the American dream during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Paradoxically, the more powerful the new nation became, the less utopian it was: "certains utopistes se mirent à douter de l'excellence du modèle qu'elle offrait, à s'inquiéter de la course à l'efficacité et au rendement, à critiquer même une démocratie orgueilleuse" (97). The American dream had evolved and was not about freedom or looking after a farm and a piece of land anymore: the same reasons which had caused the utopists' flight from Europe were beginning to corrupt the new continent. For the

utopists, the Promised Land thus turned into the worst society men had ever created: “le développement industriel titanesque, une civilisation technique et fonctionnelle, l’envahissement d’un mode de vie qui menace l’humanisme occidental, inspirent un certain effroi à l’utopiste européen” (Trousson, 98). The turnaround is such that American writers themselves start writing about the future of such a society: Jack London wrote *Iron Heels* (1908), a novel opposing a proletarian class reduced to slavery to a merciless world dedicated to economic progress. America is now a frightening counter-model and is used as a warning: the Biblical fall was reenacted once again and Eden turned into a nightmarish society.

Corin Braga quotes Raymond Trousson’s four factors which according to him have destroyed the utopian optimism: “Réalisme, pessimisme, individualisme et scepticisme apparaissent ainsi comme les quatre forces destructives de l’utopie” (2010, 13). These four factors happen to be those which progressively destroyed the American dream, for the growing urge for profit dehumanized it and revealed the worst facets of men. *Of Mice and Men* is the story of this ill-fated continent, of what it was and what it has effectively become. It reveals this tension between the original dream of freedom and the enslaving capitalist society.

Steinbeck told what, according to him, revealed the perversion this nation lived in. First, he did not choose to represent it from the point of view of those for whom the American dream was effective, but from that of the forgotten people: the ‘underclass’. George and Lennie are two migrant workers forced to travel to earn a living. All the characters the reader actually encounters are also ranchers, except for the boss, who happens to be an absent figure, and his son, who embodies everything mean, merciless and despicable this society can offer.

The first man the two heroes meet is Candy. He is an old swamper who has spent his entire life at work and now appears to be too old to be of any use. This character embodies the growing consideration of humans as machines, and the fatal end reserved to them when they cannot be used to make profits anymore. Candy appears to be aware of his fate and resigned to what awaits him, except when he offers his help for George and Lennie’s project:

“Maybe if I give you guys my money, you’ll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain’t no good at it. An’ I’ll wash dishes an’ little chicken stuff like that. But I’ll be on our own place, an’ I’ll be let to work on our own place.” He said miserably, “You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs.” (60).

Candy knows what this society has in store for him, and the only way to prevent this appears to be ownership. By peacefully taking care of a garden, he will avoid the lot of numerous workers who reach old age and secure himself a safe place to end his life. This character expresses what Steinbeck deplores about the turn the capitalist society has taken. The latter led the utopian concept of the individual to a paradox: the economic constant need for more profits erased individuals and considered them as machines, merely used as tools for progress and enrichment.

Steinbeck also uses another character, Crooks, to reveal the society’s flaws: the story is set during the mid-thirties and slavery has been abolished for more than sixty years. Yet, Crooks is still considered as inferior and rejected in other workers’ games:

“Why ain’t you wanted?” Lennie asked.

“Cause I’m black. They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me.” (68).

Crooks is the only one reading books and appears to be above the others intellectually speaking, for he is capable of the best as well as the worst, as when he takes a wicked delight in torturing Lennie, telling him George has abandoned him (71). He seems bitterly aware of his condition, for he keeps saying realistic though cynical words about black people: “If I say something, why it’s just a nigger sayin’it” (70); “Guys don’t come into a colored man’s room very much. Nobody been here but Slim” (75). However, despite of his sarcastic behaviour, Crooks shares the same fears and aspirations as his fellow workers: he apprehends loneliness and dreams of a parcel of his own: “...If you...guys would want a hand to work for nothing—just his keep, why I’d come an’ lend a hand. I ain’t so crippled I can’t work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to” (76). The vision of the farm enhanced by the reality of the savings and the imminence of its purchase make Crooks’ principles waver and he timidly offers his help. His infirmity and his skin colour expose him to attacks and this character has built



himself a shelter where no one has ever been in response to the card games he is not invited to join, even though he suffers from loneliness. Steinbeck condemns these remnants of old prejudices, for the society seemed to progress with the Abolition of Slavery but in fact has stagnated ever since, stuck into old schemes and thoughts. This persistent racism is even ridiculed in *Of Mice and Men*, for all men are suffering from loneliness but would not break it by going to a black man's room or inviting him to a card game.

The only time Crooks appears to resist his condition and raises his voice, he is snubbed back to his place by Curley's wife and is immediately closing in on himself:

Crooks stood up from his bunk and faced her. "I had enough," he said coldly. "You got no rights comin' in a colored man's room. You got no rights messing around in here at all. Now you jus' get out, an' get out quick. If you don't, I'm gonna ast the boss not to ever let you come in the barn no more."

She turned on him in scorn. "Listen, Nigger," she said. "You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?"

Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself.

She closed on him. "You know what I could do?"

Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny."

Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego—nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless. (80).

Curley's wife mentions a hanging, which was the common punishment which followed an accusation of rape, molestation or even a bad glance at a white woman. We can thus see that slavery's patterns are still present and rule the society in spite of its improvements, for even though Curley's wife behaves like an alluring actress, she can still threaten Crooks of this kind of penalty. Crooks and Candy are the two major embodiments of the people this society forgets while progressing, but Curley's wife also represents women and how doomed their expectations could be at that time;<sup>11</sup> and Lennie the retarded people, or more generally the 'different' ones.

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<sup>11</sup> However, the reader should keep in mind what we developed in the first part: women in Steinbeck's novel are rather archaic figure, thus we should not presume of Steinbeck's will to criticize their condition.

Steinbeck uses his hero's initiation to the world to condemn the latter: he introduces him to its victims and cast-off people so he realizes how childish and hopeless his dream is. Crooks embodies all the social prejudices inherited from the bloody history of the United States which are still operating at the time when the story takes place. Candy is the symbol of a society merely focused on economic progress and eternal enrichment which tends to forget the men who built it, the proletarian class. These characters are among the nicest ones in the book: the others are people who have their place in this society, like Curley and Carlson, mere brutes enjoying this life of surviving off the others without understanding the slightest meaning of events, like the very end suggests: "And Carlson said, 'Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys?'" (105). However, we will see in the next part that though he destroys the utopian American dream of property and freedom by contrasting it with its perverted modern form, Steinbeck offers the reader another vision – if not a new utopia – of life via his newly educated hero, George.

### **3) *From realism to a new utopian vision of man?***

The ending of Steinbeck's 'Mice book' has been the object of many interpretations, most of them pessimistic: "Steinbeck voit l'échec du rêve comme une caractéristique inévitable de la condition humaine" (Lemardeley 1992, 74); "the central theme is stated and restated—the good life is impossible because humanity is flawed" (Levant, 134); "mice are symbols for an inevitable failure" (Hadella, 39). However, more than mere negative words, the end of *Of Mice and Men* is a vivid depiction of reality, for, as we saw earlier, it shows the conclusion of George's 'growing up', with all the moments when he becomes aware of what life actually consists in, moments which cannot be separated from such an initiation. We will thus deal with Steinbeck's realism, or more precisely naturalism, and examine the meaning of such an end.

According to Donald Pizer, "naturalism comes after realism" (1969, 9). This is why the boundary between the two is somehow blurred, and naturalism is occasionally considered as one of realism's sub-genres. He gives his definition of the naturalistic novel:

[T]he naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and [...] the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of

experience. [...] The first tension is that between the subject matter of the naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter. The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. But the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involves sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminates in desperate moments and violent death (1969, 10).

The reader can see that this definition fits *Of Mice and Men*'s structure, plot and characters. The latter are migrant workers, come from a low background and don't correspond to the stereotypical hero, though George finally becomes one. As said in the definition, this rather common character develops heroic qualities while experiencing life and its violent feelings. This irruption of the uncommon, the epic in the everyday life of an average man is what inspired the naturalists:

Naturalistic fiction of the 1930s has its roots in the social conditions of the decade and in the intellectual and literary currents of the previous decade. James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck did not look to the naturalists of the 1890s for their inspiration but rather found it in 1920s ideas about life and literature, ideas which helped them to explain and to express the seemingly imminent collapse of the American system in the 1930s (Pizer 1982, 13).

History met literature and these writers were to be the witnesses of their century.

We introduced in the last part Mikhail Bakhtin's five genres of the novel of formation, the fifth one – the realistic novel – being the most achieved form according to him, for the hero's evolution is indissoluble from the historical one. *Of Mice and Men* seems to be falling in this last category: the naturalists of the 1930s like Steinbeck were inspired by the twenties novelists who said that "we live in a trivial, banal, and tawdry world which nevertheless encloses us and shapes our destinies. We seek to escape from this world into the inner life because only there do we seem to find the richness of feeling denied us in experience" (Pizer 1982, 13). Therefore, the inner duality Steinbeck tackles by the telling of George's story could illustrate this need to escape a world which does not fit their expectations anymore. George happens to live at a turning point in history: the Great Depression has made victims, the farmers are on the roads, looking for jobs while their lands are being taken over by new companies. The world is at the

edge of a technological era, the agricultural supremacy is over. George represents this fall of an ancient world full of promises which deceived those who actively believed in them. This ancient civilization is being replaced by an industrial one which is not hopeful for this category of people, for they know they will be cast off. Men are to evolve with society, not in it. According to Bakhtin, this last point is the main difference between usual *Bildungsromane* and the realistic type of novel of formation:

Dans les quatre types précédemment évoqués, [...] c'était l'homme qui se formait et non le monde: le monde, au contraire, servait de point de repère à l'homme en développement. La notion en tant que telle d'un monde servant d'expérience, d'école était très productive dans le roman d'apprentissage. Dans des romans tels que *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, *Simplicissimus*, *Wilhelm Meister*, la formation de l'homme se présente différemment. Ce n'est déjà plus une affaire privée. L'homme se forme **en même temps que** le monde, il reflète en lui-même la formation historique du monde (229-230).

In *Of Mice and Men*, the characters are confronted to a changing world, whose similarities with the original American dream are nothing but a mere historical memory. These heroes represent the last people who believed in this dream and were those who kept it alive. However, this evolving society makes them lose their marks and they are tugged between the ancient desire to live in a free world and the vital need to evolve with society, for as Pizer notices in his *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism*, "The retreat into the inner life transforms us into grotesque exaggerations of what we wish to be, or causes us (with fatal consequences) to seek the translation of fantasy into reality, or engages us in an endless search for the understanding and love denied us in life" (14). Lennie wishes so hard to possess a farm and be allowed to tend the rabbits that he cannot help killing by accident all the soft things he pets while picturing the rabbits in his mind. He lives so deeply in his fantasy he is lost in it. George avoids the fatal issues mentioned above by killing this part of him unwilling to evolve.

Steinbeck's novel is also the account of one of the major preoccupations of his time according to Pizer, that of unity: "The age was affected by a desire to believe in the unity of the national experience because of the national disaster. We are made one by our tragic condition and we must therefore find ways to dramatize this awful unity" (1993, 26). George's inner division reflecting the turning point in history thus needs to be solved. The murder of Lennie represents the removal of the ancient society and its

unachievable dreams, for the underclass cannot survive out of dreams and memories, torn apart between past and present and far too scared to look at the future. They need to evolve as the society they belong to is progressing, and there is no room left for past expectations. The death of Lennie can thus be associated with the death of the American dream as the Founding Fathers thought it. The dream is now inseparable from industry and technology. Paradoxically, a murder allows life to go on and a deletion brings unity. Pizer adds that to that extent, Steinbeck mingles national history to small parts of a man's lifetime, suggesting the universal character of one man's struggles (1993, 26). This is how Steinbeck offers his vision of the complete man at the end of his novel though it seems that even if they adapt, men cannot survive in this new society so different from what they believed in and dreamt of.

George's initiation reflects the underclass's own struggle to adapt to this new society, as Bakhtin explains:

*L'homme ne se situe plus à l'intérieur d'une époque mais à la frontière de deux époques, au point de passage d'une époque à une autre époque. Ce passage s'effectue en lui et à travers lui. Il est contraint de devenir un type d'homme nouveau, encore inédit (230).*

George assumes a far more important role than that of a mere novice: he is the hinge of his century, he is the one thanks to whom the whole working class is going to adapt with more or less difficulties to this new society. Steinbeck's dystopia can thus end with the idea of the possibility of a new utopia, that of a modern man, still capable of evolution when it is needed but a conscious and chosen one, rather than a crucial constraint to survive. George experiences disillusion and despondency when he realizes his dream is outdated and will never come true, just like the workers felt after the Great Depression, or like black people felt after having believed in the immense hope the Thirteenth Amendment had raised concerning black people's rights and living conditions. These people fail because of this sudden change in society which does not correspond with what they expected. They are usually minorities, victims of what Pizer calls "mass values—principally those of a competitive and exploitative capitalism but also of other kinds" (1982, 15). The individual is destroyed by values applied to the whole society without any differentiation or case-by-case basis, key-principle of collective utopias. Steinbeck's society indicates that these utopias can be dangerous, for though the starting

premise is often full of good will and promises, it soon diverges to an even more perverted form of society than the one they wanted to escape.

Paradoxically, as Pizer notices when studying naturalistic works, “the theme of the destruction of the individual by a group value contains, however, the counter-theme of the potential for growth by those who realize that there is a beneficial strength in a mass ethos when it is used to protect and nurture rather than control the individual” (1982, 15). Therefore, Steinbeck criticizes both the capitalist ideal and the communist utopia, for the latter erases the individual whereas the other neglects the positive aspect of collectivism when it is used in a caring purpose. *Of Mice and Men* is about the waking up of these minorities who seem to have been fooled but struggle to survive instead of trying to find a solution to escape this vicious circle. Steinbeck proposes a way out through the character of George. The first step of this initiation to progress and more widely, to life would be to realize the situation. The second one, as we saw, would be acceptance, for mere rebellion without any plan of action or solution would not be productive. Yet, the hero must not interrupt his initiation here: he will fall back immediately into his previous state. This is where even though hopelessness is what defines naturalism – for in order to condemn a society and its values this cynical tone was needed – Steinbeck’s novel cannot be seen as a pessimistic novel: if it was, George would have been found besides Lennie, dead or alive, or would even have dropped the gun before killing him. Such a scenario would have signified the failure of the initiation and revealed Steinbeck’s deep discouragement as for how he would consider the future of the minorities.

However, it is not the case: as we saw previously, George climbs **up** the small hill, gets out of his previous situation, reaches a new state, that of an initiated man. Moreover, he is helped by Slim, who does not let him down at any moment. To take up Pizer’s idea we previously mentioned, an important – and often under-estimated – strength can be drawn from a collective action aiming at protecting individuals rather than controlling them. We tackled in the last part George’s possible guiding role as an achievement after his initiation, and here it springs into focus: he appears to be Steinbeck’s complete man, a utopia of the worker. After having condemned his society’s flaws, Steinbeck offers the reader his idea of a way out, embodied by George. In that

way, he has some of the Biblical figure of Moses, guiding his people out of Egypt, a country where they came hoping to find abundance and peace but finally ended up as slaves. George leads the way to a new 'land', still unknown but despite this uncertainty, the most important is that he triggers humanity's key capacity throughout its history, the one which allowed men to survive: adaptability. Men are capable of change and have been doing so since humanity was born. According to Steinbeck, it seems to be a determining factor in men's survival, more than ever, for the world is evolving faster and societies do not await those who cannot adapt. He condemns this cruelty and offers the solution of a collective strength like solidarity to save the individuals.

Steinbeck gave the reader a hint about it when his characters' dialogues mention loneliness several times. Loneliness is a modern illness and is feared by these men though they seem to be fearless men leading a dangerous life as migrant workers. It can be solved by solidarity, along with other problems these minorities encounter: racism, attacks, or mere attempts to erase them. Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of a collective action as a response to a collective mass values aimed at enriching some people at the expense of others, the casualties of the technological revolution.

## Conclusion

The original hypothesis has been through many changes during this study. We are no longer as categorical as we were about *Of Mice and Men* being a *Bildungsroman*. Yet, this was a striking aspect at the first reading of the novel: George was another Huckleberry Finn or Wilhelm Meister, and despite the fact he was not a young man, he shared several similarities with the classic protagonists of the *Bildungsromane*. In fact, George's quest is triggered by some discontent which has to be solved at the end of the journey, both physical and mental, and consists of repeated harsh confrontations with reality aiming at including him in the society. Moreover, taking a look at Steinbeck's biography and critics' books, we noticed his strong fascination for the Arthurian legends and the importance the biblical inheritance bears in his novels. Both influences happen to be myths, with the formative dimension this term includes, thus reinforcing our hypothesis. George was an American Jesus and a modern Galahad, bringing a whole new lot of revelations corresponding to his era. However, there are some divergences: a *Bildungsroman* is usually a long novel, closer to the biography genre than the novella. Steinbeck's novel also has the particularity of having two characters standing for the hero and the divergent part of him, his inner child, which excludes it from the classic novels of formation where the cause of the hero's progression is external.

We then turned to another form of education, though of much less wide range than the *Bildungsroman* genre: initiation. This genre is actually the closest to the real nature of the novel: George's experience is more similar to that of a novice belonging to an Australian tribe than that of a Frederic Moreau. He is being guided by a mentor, who has probably already been through the same initiation before, as it is the case in these tribes where every boy is going through this rite of initiation to which women cannot attend. Slim embodies this instructor whose role is to show the 'exit' to George by preventing him from a possible failure. The role of the instructor, both in *Of Mice and Men* and in the initiation rites includes a clever handling of fear: the adults in charge of the boys' development scare them so they can face it and learn to be brave; Slim confronts George with his own fears so he can realize fear is not a reason for inaction and passivity. Moreover, in these rites, the break between childhood and adulthood is made evident: the mothers mourn their boys, for they know they will only get grown-up men back instead of their children. In *Of Mice and Men* this rupture is even clearer:



Steinbeck created a character for George's childhood, thus stressing the importance of this aspect of his hero. Finally, George's progression in itself is related to that of a novice: he faces several tests which aim at forming him. The boy experiences the violence of hunting; George's inner part represented by Lennie gets in a violent fight with the boss' son in spite of his original determination not to get into trouble. Both are introduced to mysteries which rule the community they belong to by their forms, one will learn the origin of the world, the other has a deep cathartic conversation. Initiation is thus what defines Steinbeck's novel best. However, we had to refine even more the results of our study so far.

To do so, we tried to apply several literary patterns such as Girard's sacrificial pattern. In fact, the character of Lennie could correspond to Girard's scapegoat, for he is killed to solve a crisis. It did not work perfectly, for some obscure issues remained: Lennie's conscious or unconscious responsibility in the murder of Curley's wife, the final killing preventing the cathartic lynching and the return of a peaceful situation after the death of the scapegoat were as many problematic questions and this theory had to be abandoned, though some of the elements which worked were kept. Moreover, the meaning of the dream was still unexplained. The utopian character of the latter led us to develop this aspect: in fact, the pastoral image of the American dream finally vanishing when confronted to reality carried a somewhat pessimistic tone that critics have pointed out. Steinbeck criticizes a childish vision of the American dream which still is an ideal for many workers. He condemns the fact that this vision has been fooling the American citizens, making them hope and save for an unreachable ideal while in doing so the evolved version of this same dream was exploiting them. It seems that according to Steinbeck, individualist and collective utopias are the same things, for they forget two of what he considers to be the most important things: the power of solidarity and the importance of individuals. This last word reflects the entire problematic of *Of Mice and Men*, the presence of duality in a word meant to define the self. George's inner conflict illustrates it, so do the faults of two different utopias: the individualistic one forgetting the importance of solidarity and men's need for company while its evolved version finishes the dehumanizing process, erasing individuals for even more progress and enrichment. George symbolizes the new generation of workers who had to adapt to this society, in spite of its failures in protecting the individuals and lending an ear to the

minorities. He is Steinbeck's own utopia for the future of the working class, for he and the other naturalists are the witnesses of the changes happening in their century and despite their general pessimism, *Of Mice and Men* proposes a way out of this situation.

Steinbeck will explore the subject further on in the novel following this one: *The Grapes of Wrath*, considered as his masterpiece, tells the exodus of a family of Okies, forced to leave their farm which has been taken by companies. This is the beginning of a journey to California, the Promised Land, where they believe they will find work and orange trees. During their journey, the characters will soon realize the utopian character of their project to finally take up the whole importance of solidarity. The baseline is thus similar to that of what can be seen as its rough draft: the Arthurian references to a Quest and a Grail are present, as the Biblical character of their exodus. If this novel has the success we know, it has to be kept in mind that the ideas Steinbeck clearly and openly stands for in *The Grapes of Wrath* had been previously introduced in *Of Mice and Men* in a less obvious and committed style. The small novella gave birth to a masterpiece which will be considered to be one of the most efficient proletarian proses of the century. The difficulties encountered to classify Steinbeck's 'Mice book' into known categories of the novel as a genre show its originality and its dimension, that of a *chef d'oeuvre*, a discreet *chef d'oeuvre*.

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## Appendix 1

### Robert Burns' poem 'To A Mouse'

TO A MOUSE

ON TURNING HER UP IN HER NEST WITH THE PLOUGH, NOVEMBER 1785

Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie,

O, what a panic in thy breastie!

Thou need na start awa sae hasty,

Wi' bickering brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,

Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry man's dominion,

Has broken nature's social union,

An' justifies that ill opinion,

Which makes thee startle

At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,

An' fellow mortal!

I doubt na, whiles, but thou mayst thieve;

What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!

A daimen icker in a thrave

'S a sma' request;

I'll get a blessing wi' the lave,

An' never miss't!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!

It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!

An' naething, now, to big a new ane,

O' foggage green!

An' bleak December's winds ensuing,

Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,  
 An' weary winter comin fast,  
 An' cozie here, beneath the blast,  
 Thou thought to dwell—  
 Till crash! the cruel coulter past  
 Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,  
 Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!  
 Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,  
 But house or hald,  
 To thole the winter's sleety dribble,  
 An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,  
 In proving foresight may be vain;  
 The best laid shemes o' mice an' men  
 Gang aft agley,  
 An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
 For promis'd joy!

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me;  
 The present only toucheth thee:  
 But och! I backward cast my e'e,  
 On prospects drear!  
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
 I guess an' fear!

**MOTS-CLÉS:** John Steinbeck, *Des Souris et des Hommes*, *Bildungsroman*, initiation, rêve Américain, utopie, naturalisme, Bible, légendes Arthuriennes.

### RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire est une étude du roman de John Steinbeck *Des Souris et des Hommes*. Il présente deux des œuvres littéraires majeures dans la littérature occidentale qui influencent le caractère initiatique de ce roman : la Bible et les légendes Arthuriennes. Cette étude cherche également à appliquer à ce roman différentes théories ou genres apparentés à la quête afin de le définir : le roman d'apprentissage ou *Bildungsroman*, les rites initiatiques ou encore le schéma sacrificiel de René Girard sont abordés – entre autres – et mis en parallèle avec le roman. La fin particulièrement abrupte et à caractère pessimiste de ce dernier est particulièrement étudiée dans la dernière partie, où l'utopie et le naturalisme font partie de l'analyse qui vise à appréhender la conception qu'a Steinbeck de la société dans laquelle vivent ses personnages et la solution aux problèmes engendrés par l'évolution du rêve américain, solution qui sera pleinement développée dans le roman qui suit celui-ci, *Les Raisins de la Colère*, considéré par beaucoup comme son chef-d'œuvre.

**KEYWORDS:** John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, *Bildungsroman*, initiation, American dream, utopia, Naturalism, Bible, Arthurian legends.

### ABSTRACT

This is a study of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Its major influences, two of the cornerstones of western civilization – the Bible and the Arthurian legends – are analyzed, for these works shape the progressive aspect of the novel. The theme of the quest is thus developed through different genres and theories such as the formative novel or *Bildungsroman*, initiation rites and sacrificial patterns, among others. These theories are applied to the story along with an analysis of the characters and their role in the hero's initiation. Eventually, the end is the object of a close study, for its violence and the impression of fated existence it gives to the reader has given the book the reputation of a strongly pessimistic novel. Utopia and naturalism are tackled in this part in order to apprehend Steinbeck's critical vision of the society his characters live in and the way out he offers to solve the problems of selection this evolved version of the American dream encounters. This solution will be developed in his following novel and perhaps his most achieved one, *The Grapes of Wrath*.