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The Emplotment of the US Capitalist Expression in John Steinbeck's *of Mice and Men*

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I. Introduction

The 1929 World economic crisis has constituted a paradigm shift in the US entrepreneurial system. Thus the cultural belief in the capitalist system was shaken by the crisis in the sense to uproot it in the advantage of any eventual economic system, such as socialism. Because the capitalist principles have always connoted with those of individualism, to have a friend or to be part of a group of people was becoming the only alternative when the other system was failing. The proof of which could be grasped in the discursive analysis of Steinbeck's novel – *Of Mice and Men*. Now, does Steinbeck's literary work openly express the rootedness of the American economic system in capitalism? Or, is the narrative in that novel a critique of the plight of a certain stratum of the American society-the landless, poor, agricultural workers? This article studies Steinbeck's insinuating address to both capitalism and socialism through his fictional work. The accent is on the implications of the characters' behaviors that convey the messages about the two systems. If among the themes of the novel exists "the celebration of friendship," Lennie and George's friendship did not contribute to the economic progress of either of them. Rather, George's intelligence has been negatively consumed by Lennie's dullness. This means if George has been alone, he could have achieved success in his life. On the other hand, the predatory nature of human existence that has revealed the extermination of the weaker almost always constitutes aperversion of the relationship between employer and employee to the point of individual's strong will to be independent for a freer entrepreneurship.

The main arguments of this article turn around Kevin Attell's "An overview of *Of Mice and Men*," Marilyn Chandler McEntyre's "*Of Mice and Men*: A Story of Innocence Retained," and around Norma L. Goodrich's "Bachelors in Fiction, Through John Steinbeck and Jean Giono" among others.

In effect, *Of Mice and Men* is a novel that shows how hard it was in the times of the Great Depression. The difference between Lennie and George compared to the other migrant workers is that George and Lennie had each other. The novel shows how George takes care of Lennie who has a mental disability. Most of the migrant workers wanted to achieve the success of the American Dream that was different for every American. Lennie and George wanted to achieve their American Dream as well. Lennie and George's dream was to own a ranch and live off. Conversely, almost all the rest of the migrant workers, having heard of George and Lennie's project of managing their own ranch, decided to join them in their ownership, which is stopped by the tragic end of George's friendship with Lennie.

Through a discursive breakdown of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, this study is structured in two parts. The first is about the ethics of human relationship that is conducive to either a positive friendship for both or negative for either or both of them. Ethics here challenge the American cultural belief in individualism and self-reliance through which success is guaranteed. Because moral codes would impinge on individual freedom in partnership, the individual success or failure would only depend on the success or failure of the partner.

The second part is dealing with social realist and naturalist methodologies that insinuate the American capitalist economic system. In these realms, the individual desire to remove from the tension of the employer's treatment for a freer and non-controlled organization is synonymous with socialist early stages that also constitute a challenge to actual social situations. And, arguably, since socialism must fail in favor of capitalism, the good friendship of Lennie and George should be unsuccessful. And the incentives that this friendship has given to all the hands of the ranch to have a vision of a group of workers – masters of their own without control – must nosedive.

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II. The Ethics of Human Relationship and the Etiquette of the American Individualism

The celebration of friendship as a main theme raised in *Of Mice and Men* is worthwhile because of the usefulness of the friendly relationship to Lennie's protection. However, to consider the tragic end of that friendship as a success because George killed his dear friend out of protection is not far from considering it as a failure that breaks down the socialist shoot in the egg. This part studies John Steinbeck's treatment of friendship full of interest in a country where individualism is a cultural entity.

Very often the natural handling that Steinbeck gives to his characters' behavior consoles the readers wonder about his fiction. Why should we qualify George and Lennie's friendship as a good one that merits celebration? Realistically, numbing one's own freedom for the satisfaction of a relative cultivates inclination and good will from the other side. Therefore, celebrating the friendship of these two characters is to allude to the author's success in his fictitious arrangements that matches with nature or social rules. Thus Kevin Attell argues that

> Steinbeck's debt to and lineage from Social Realist and Naturalist fiction, then, is made clear through a reading of the way he constantly places his characters and narrative within the context of very specific and, more importantly, actual social situations. The narrative of *Of Mice and Men*–from George and Lennie's hopeful dreaming to the calamitous end to those dreams-is founded upon a rigorous analysis and critique of the encompassing structures of social organization and the ways they affect the people who must live within them.[1]

The actual social situation here is the failure of individualism caused by the Great Depression. In other words, the long standing capitalist economic system that prevailed from the industrial revolution to the 1930s is more or less collapsing. And the norms therein are dominated by individual endeavor to succeed in life without depending on a relative or friend.

Moreover, the United States of America had long struggled through McCarthyism against the Soviet Union's economic system. The latter system is naturally gaining the American society for the failure of the former. This does not imply that friendship did not exist before the World economic crisis. But the particularity of the one created by Steinbeck is the contextualization of a heavy dependence that might give birth to new social principles to the extent of jeopardizing the actual American economic perspectives.

Every worker on the ranch suffers from solitude. They have the feeling of amazement to see George and Lennie always together. They have finally joined them for a collective ownership of a piece of land. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre observes that,

> For George to dream of "making a stake" so he and Lennie can have their "little place" hardly seems culpable, based though it is on the very notions of private property, possession, ownership, and exclusion that relate capitalism to the sin of Cain. But for Steinbeck to make explicit that relationship between capitalistic pursuit of self-interest and the original crime of murder is to hack at one of the thickest roots of American culture.[2]

But Steinbeck's elaboration on the socialist formation of a group of workers constitutes a demonstration that concludes with failure. If George and Lennie's friendship is celebrated, it means that it has respected the ethics of human relation to yield the grouping of numerous people. Others in the ranch are attracted by many of their individual traits. These traits enhance the natural view of others on their innocence from some vices as beautifully attracting for sexual partner. Norare they united for sex, as their appearances could have shown. Rowland Molony observes the rallying characterizations in George and Lennie:

> Two features stand out among all these characters. One is their lack of sexual attraction, and the other is their relative inability with language. This should not be surprising. A crucial indicator of intelligence is a facility with language. And how can those who are palpably defective attract a mate? None of the individuals discussed here has physical beauty. Nor do they have any of the other (male) qualifications that seem to succeed in life and in fiction: like silky manners, wealth, power or that winning combination of a coarse nature and boorish manners that appears to succeed in romantic fiction. Nor do they have wit. Wit is an aphrodisiac. The boy in the group who makes the girls laugh is already streets ahead of the others. This raises the point about facility with language. If we have perception and the words to express our perception, then we are clever. And if that is accompanied by physical beauty then we are made for life. The simple-minded may well have charm and originality, but if the bottom line is suitability as a mate then they simply don't score.

[1] Attell, Kevin. "An overview of *Of Mice and Men*."*Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2015. *Literature Resource Center*.

[2] McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler. "*Of Mice and Men*: A Story of Innocence Retained." *The Betrayal of Brotherhood in the Work of John Steinbeck*.Ed. Michael J. Meyer. Lewiston: Mellen, 2000. 203-222. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*.Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 194. Detroit: Gale, 2014. *Literature Resource Center*.

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This of course reinforces their poignant and isolated station in life.[3]

Suitable? No, neither Lennie is suitable for George and vice versa. The only suitability here is when one has to help the weak if they are strong. However, George complains, "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."[4]This complaint foreshadows Steinbeck's strategy that leads this friendship to a negative end or at least the liberation of George after having protected his friend under the death shelter. Because George spends all his time and energy to contain his friend's caprices, the pain of being isolated in this task is more felt than when he could be alone but using the fruit of his effort in his own advantage. Therefore, George's altruist performance with Lennie becomes unpraise worthy because of the fact that George is also an indigent. It is in this perspective that this relationship could be laudable in the sense that George endeavors in his friend's satisfaction being himself in need of what he gives out. That is amply sufficient to celebrate this friendship because a good gift should not be with undesired thing. On the other hand, since it is obvious that because of Lennie George cannot progress or even have a girlfriend, the strategy of ending this friendship connotes with George's freedom to work rendering to his own needs, which is one of the main principles of individualism, self-reliance, and even the core of capitalism.

Thus, the celebration of George and Lennie's friendship as it is evidently proved in the novel is a background against which Steinbeck insinuates the hypothesis of sustaining the American cultural entity that strongly believes in individualist way of achieving success. This friendship has been thorough and complete. It has shown clearly how independent one is when having to take care of a friend – a friend in need is a friend indeed – and how heavily one's success or failure depends on the other in friendship. Its harmful aspect on individual partners could not be vividly noticed if its ethics has not been respected.

III. Social Realist and Naturalist Methodologies: The Insinuation of American Capitalism in *of Mice and Men*

Individualism and self-reliance receive emphasis in the context of the American character not only because of the individual freedom to choose, but also for the fact that they delineate the country's economic system. Thus almost every character in *Of Mice and Men* has expressed, through actions or words, the need to act on their own choice for their future plans. This is understood either in the failure of one who has followed another character's advice or a group of workers disappointed because of their intent to demise capitalism. This section discusses the strategies through which Steinbeck insinuates his advocacy of and support to American capitalism.

To start with, the relocating effected by the ranch hands of the novel ordains one of the principles of capitalism – at least individual capitalism. The following conversation between George and Lennie implies that both are relocating for advantage and many other reasons.

> "… You remember where we're going now?" Lennie looked startled and then in embarrassment hid his face against his knees. "I forgot again"
>
> "Jesus Christ," George said resignedly. "Well – look, we're gonna work on a ranch like the one we come from up north."[5]

Though the main reason in this context may be that of security for this relocation, the general spirit of the displacement after the World's economic crisis of 1929 was that of life betterment and the pursuit of profits. "Driven by competition, individual capitalists seek competitive advantages within this spatial structure and therefore tend to be drawn or compelled to move to those locations where costs are lower or profit rates higher."[6] This is in the context of the American working class under the impact of the World economic crisis.

The main problem relating to the class division in the US is the clear disparities that even lead to the cruel treatment wield by the dominant class. However, as we could eventually imagine the differentiations in cultural and ethnic levels, the economic opportunities turn out to be the most observed measuring tape in the American society in the sense that requires from an individual the total submission to his/her employer. As John Carlos Rowe points out, "Far more likely to divide recent immigrants from US 'national culture,' as it is sometimes called, are social disparities and economic opportunities. Class hierarchies, in other words, are far more divisive of peoples in the United States […] than language or culture."[7] Thus, the working class has only to work hard in order to quit the menacing atmosphere

[3] Rowland Molony, "Simple minds: Rowland Molony considers some of the many literary instances of the identification of male simple-mindedness with virtue." *The English Review* 13.3 (2003): 18+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 17 Sept. 2015.

[4] John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 9.

[5] Ibid. pp. 7-8.

[6] David Harvey. *The New Imperialism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.94.

[7] John Carlos Rowe. "Postnationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies" in*The Futures of American Studies*. edit.by Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wigman. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 168.

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of the other class. That is where an individual is called upon the result of personal efforts for reckoning.

The example of some characters in the novel indicates the importance of individual decision concerning him/herself. Through the character of Curley's wife, Steinbeck insinuates the failure of an individual who does not take a decision on his or her own behalf. Curley's wife narrates her regretful personal story to Lennie:

> 'I lived right in Salinas,' she said. 'Come there when I was a kid. Well, a show come through, an' I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my ol' lady wouldn't let me. She says because I was on'y fifteen. But the guy says I coulda. If I'd went, I wouldn't be livin' like this, you bet.'
>
> Lennie stroked the pup back and forth. 'We gonna have a little place – an' rabbits,' he explained.
>
> She went on with her story quickly, before she could be interrupted. 'Nother time I met a guy, an' he was in pitchers. Went out to the Riverside Dance Palace with him. He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was natural. Soon's he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it.' She looked closely at Lennie to see if she was impressing him. 'I never got that letter,' she said. 'I always thought my ol' lady stole it. Well, I wasn't gonna stay no place where I couldn't get nowhere or make something of myself, an' where they stoleyour letters. Iast her if she stole it, too, an' she says no. So I married Curley. Met him out to the Riverside Dance Palace that same night.'[8]

This implies how this character could not act according to her will or make a decision on the person to get married to. In some cases, one may be constrained to get married to unwilled person and turn out to be happy in the course of marital life. This is not the case of Curley's wife. She confides to Lennie that:

> 'Well I ain't told this to nobody before. Maybe I ought'n to. I don't *like* Curley. He ain't a nice fella.' And because she had confided in him, she moved closer to Lennie and sat beside him. 'Coulda been in the movies an' had nice clothes – all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me. When they had them previews I coulda went to them, an' spoke in the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent because I was in the pitcher. An' all them nice clothes like they wear. Because this guy says I was a natural.'[9]

And this is because she did not marry the artist who could take her from place to place. Rather she married Curley under constraining circumstances. The consequences of this sad marriage are tangible. One character in the ranch informs George about the behavior of Curley's wife, while playing cards with Whit: "Whit laid down his cards impressively. 'Well, stick around an' keep your eyes open. You'll see plenty. She ain'tconcealin' nothing. I never seen nobody like her. She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody, I bet she even gives the stable buck the eye. I don't know what the hell she wants.'"[10] Giving eye to everybody is conducive to unfaithfulness and loss of marriage. In her case this drove her to confide herself to Lennie to the point of allowing the latter to touch her hair that led to her death in Lennie's hands.

Through this representation Steinbeck suggests an individual's failure when relying on others in every aspect of human life. He rather reinforces their isolation in order to make them rely on their own effort and be free. That is one of the most important principles of American capitalism. Jonathan P. Davis remarks that:

> Close attention to phrases used to define--free market, open competition, privately owned – soon reveals that the capitalist ideology in itself promotes a war among neighbors in its emphasis on the self before the community. Unlike communism or socialism, which both steer toward spreading wealth among the community, reducing the number of wealthy figureheads as compared to America, American capitalism reinforces isolation and deception as imperative in order to assure furthering the self toward capital gain. Because capitalism supports competition in an open market, people will naturally alienate themselves from others in competing for their personal goals.[11]

Thus the potentially successful an individual becomes in isolation constitutes Steinbeck's strategy to insinuate the economic system of the US. This economic system, as well as nationalism is the guiding force for short stories' writers. Joseph Urgo asserts that: "A good deal of the vitality and energy associated with the American short story originates at the intersection of two fundamental forces in the United States: capitalism and nationalism." [12] Therefore, if one's nationalist struggle involves capitalism, it means Steinbeck is reinforcing the American cultural value of individualism. But the particularity of the American capitalist structure is its total susceptibility to trod down the working class.

[8] John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 87.
[9] Ibid. pp. 87-88.
[10] Ibid. p.51.
[11] Jonathan P. Davis. "Caught in the Machine of American Capitalism."*Stephen King's America*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994. 77-89. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Literature Resource Center.*
[12] Joseph Urgo. "Capitalism, nationalism, and the American short story."*Studies in Short Fiction* 35.4 (1998): 339+. *Literature Resource Center*.

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Eric Paul, in "Clash of Capitalisms" compares the European capitalism and the Anglo-Saxon capitalism and finds that: "….the European model bears a striking resemblance to that of Japan because of the interventionist role of the state and regulations that impose restraints on competition and self-serving appetite. While the Rhenish model is not a workers' paradise, it is a more humane form of capitalism than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart."[13] It is in this perspective that the unkind treatment of workers can be notified in the American form of capitalism. So Steinbeck is not only insinuating the capitalist domination in the American economic system, but also describing how it functions.

The furious competition in this form of capitalism reveals the predatory aspect of human character. The employer's relation with an employee is not only set against the economic progress of the latter but also looks down upon the inalienable rights of the employee to life and freedom. This is exemplified in *Of Mice and Men*by the attitude of Curley, the son of the ranch's owner toward the ranch hands. For their progress, Joyce Moss and George Wilson cite Steinbeck: "Most new arrivals to ranches were broke. Their employers operated stores at which the laborers could purchase food and other necessities on credit. As Steinbeck notes, this virtually enslaved the laborer: 'Thus he must work a second day to pay for his first, and so on. He is continually in debt. He must work' (Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, p. 35)."[14] On the other hand, workers lose their right to freedom once employed.Being the son of the owner drives Curley to think he deserves the right and the strength to shut up every mouth on the ranch. Considering the plight in the working place, Lennie required George: "Le's get outa here. It's mean here.'' We gotta stay,' George said shortly. 'Shut up now. The guys'llcomin' in."[15] This statement, made by George after he anticipates trouble, shows the impossible situation in which he and Lennie are caught. Though staying means trouble, leaving means starvation and hopelessness.

Among many other examples in the novel through which John Steinbeck insinuates the American capitalism we can mention the death of the dream that almost all the ranch hands have. Born from George and Lennie's friendship, the dream of owning a private piece of land has gained the workers who have conversed with either George or Lennie. Due to the economic and physical hardships that employees face, the good idea would be to be self-employed. Thus joining the program to have a land without a master was quick and easy. Since this was not going to be joint-venture, it alluded to the beginning of a socialist or communist system where equality among individuals is more accentuated and the number of wealthy people less.

The suggestion of capitalism in Steinbeck's fiction is at the same time advocacy for this system in the country. Because the period of World economic crisis of 1929 witnessed British loss of the World hegemony, the US had the chance to emerge as a hegemon with a particular economic system. According to Theodore H. Cohn,

> The disastrous experience of the interwar period resulted partly from a lack of economic leadership, and hegemonic stability theorists argue that a global hegemon increases the likelihood that there will be a more stable, open international economy. According to these theorists, British was the global hegemon in the nineteenth century. During the interwar period, however, Britain was no longer able, and the United States was not yet willing to assume the hegemonic duties of promoting freer trade and an open, stable economic system.[16]

The will of the United States to be a global hegemon, according to me, should be firstly concretized by the nation's cultural base that could clearly define the type of internal economic system to adopt. Though this concretization is being done by writers like Steinbeck, the vivid remark, especially from this novel, reveals the rejection of the other systems – communism and socialism – indirectly by the one being settled down. For the uncompromising competition among individuals to be capital owners would not allow the existence of a high number of wealthy and would always commend the predicament of poor citizens.

IV. Conclusion

The study of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*reveals, among many other assumptions, the fact that this novel constitutes an indirect address to the United States' economic system that was emerging during the period of the World economic crisis. Through the reactions of various characters involved in this fictitious work, it is obvious that the writer is insinuating, in his nationalist endeavor, the existence of capitalism as an economic system specific for the United States. And he excludes, through his methodology, the other potential economic systems, such as communism and socialism that are attempting to overtake the nation when British is losing the World economic control.

[13] Eric Paul. "Clash of Capitalisms" (ISSA Review, Volume 6 Nr.1 2007) p. 33.

[14] Joyce Moss and George Wilson "Overview: *Of Mice and Men*." *Literature and Its Times*: *Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*.. Vol. 3: Growth of Empires to the Great Depression (1890-1930s). Detroit: Gale, 1997. *Literature Resource Center*.

[15] *Of Mice and Men*, p.34.

[16] Theodore H. Cohn. *Global Political Economy: Theory and Practice.* 3rd edition.(New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), p.27.

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It is in this perspective that this article has been structured into two parts. The first part studies the writer's strategy in showing the importance of human relations by celebrating a good friendship. The celebration of this friendship is about the exhibition of George's faithfulness toward his friend Lennie in a country where individualism and self-reliance are cultural values. Therefore, our finding here turns around the failure of that celebrated friendship. This is to mean that Steinbeck has exhibited a relationship in which one partner relied on the other. Even though the success of this relationship based upon the good care that George gave to his mentally disabled friend, this does not contribute to his individual freedom and material success because he realized that without Lennie he could have succeeded in his life and have girlfriend. Thus, Steinbeck raises the negative consequences of a good friendship in order to put emphasis on the usefulness of individualism and self-reliance. That is why this part is entitled: The Ethics of Human Relationship and the Etiquette of the American Individualism.

The second part deals with the writer's methodologies that put capitalism in manifestation as the United States' economic system. This manifestation is through the representation of the characters in the novel. The behaviors of those characters show the functionality of the system and at the same time the exclusion of the other potential economic systems that would take hold of the American nation. To apprehend the expression of capitalism and the elimination of communism and socialism in the United States' economic system is to understand how Steinbeck utilizes his characters in his effort to establish a fundamental cultural value. Since the US was to become a global hegemon after World War I, there was a need of a nationalist struggle to concretize the nation's cultural base on which to set the country's economy. That is what pushed Steinbeck to display in his novel the existence and the functionality of capitalism in the United States of America, where "most want to do right by others". [17]

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