

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

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## Abstract

The global economic state of affairs was shaken by the crisis of 1929. This situation witnessed the decline of British as a global hegemon and the promotion of the United States to be the potential economic leader. For nationalist reasons, artists and writers found it necessary to concretize the cultural basis of the country on which to set its economic system. This article studies John Steinbeck's fiction that embodies the insinuation of the existence of capitalism in the United States through its functionality. The main argument in this discourse analysis is that Steinbeck's methodology to address the US's capitalism resides in the representation through which characters expose that economic system and at the same time struggle to exclude other unwanted systems that are forcing their ways through.

**Index terms**— capitalism, representation, individualism, selfreliance, communism, cultural value, nationalism.

## 1 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 a perversion 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

45 and live off. Conversely, almost all the rest of the migrant workers, having heard of George and Lennie's project  
46 of managing their own ranch, decided to join them in their ownership, which is stopped by the tragic end of  
47 George's friendship with Lennie.

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

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

## 60 2 II.

### 61 The Ethics of Human Relationship and the Etiquette of the American Individualism

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

67 Very often the natural handling that Steinbeck gives to his characters' behavior consoles the readers wonder  
68 about his fiction. Why should we qualify George and Lennie's friendship as a good one that merits celebration?  
69 Realistically, numbing one's own freedom for the satisfaction of a relative cultivates inclination and good will from  
70 the other side. Therefore, celebrating the friendship of these two characters is to allude to the author's success in  
71 his fictitious arrangements that matches with nature or social rules. Thus Kevin Attell argues that Steinbeck's  
72 debt to and lineage from Social Realist and Naturalist fiction, then, is made clear through a reading of the  
73 way he constantly places his characters and narrative within the context of very specific and, more importantly,  
74 actual social situations. The narrative of Of Mice and Men-from George and Lennie's hopeful dreaming to the  
75 calamitous end to those dreams-is founded upon a rigorous analysis and critique of the encompassing structures  
76 of social organization and the ways they affect the people who must live within them. 1 Moreover, the United  
77 States of America had long struggled through McCarthyism against the Soviet Union's economic system. The  
78 latter system is naturally gaining the American society for the failure of the former. This does not imply that  
79 friendship did not exist before the World economic crisis. But the particularity of the one created by Steinbeck  
80 is the contextualization of a heavy dependence that might give birth to new social The actual social situation  
81 here is the failure of individualism caused by the Great Depression. In other words, the long standing capitalist  
82 economic system that prevailed from the industrial revolution to the 1930s is more or less collapsing. And the  
83 norms therein are dominated by individual endeavor to succeed in life without depending on a relative or friend.  
84 principles to the extent of jeopardizing the actual American economic perspectives.

85 Every worker on the ranch suffers from solitude. They have the feeling of amazement to see George and Lennie  
86 always together. They have finally joined them for a collective ownership of a piece of land. Marilyn Chandler  
87 McEntyre observes that, For George to dream of "making a stake" so he and Lennie can have their "little place"  
88 hardly seems culpable, based though it is on the very notions of private property, possession, ownership, and  
89 exclusion that relate capitalism to the sin of Cain. But for Steinbeck to make explicit that relationship between  
90 capitalistic pursuit of self-interest and the original crime of murder is to hack at one of the thickest roots of  
91 American culture. 2 Two features stand out among all these characters. One is their lack of sexual attraction,  
92 and the other is their relative inability with language. This should not be surprising. A crucial indicator of  
93 intelligence is a facility with language. And how can those who are palpably defective attract a mate? None  
94 of the individuals discussed here has physical beauty. Nor do they have any of the other (male) qualifications  
95 that seem to succeed in life and in fiction: like silky manners, wealth, power or that winning combination of a  
96 coarse nature and boorish manners that appears to succeed in romantic fiction. Nor do they have wit. Wit is an  
97 aphrodisiac. The boy in the group who makes the girls laugh is already streets ahead of the others. This raises  
98 the point about facility with language. If we have perception and the words to express our perception, then we  
99 are clever. And if that is accompanied by physical beauty then we are made for life. The simple-minded may  
100 well have charm and originality, but if the bottom line is suitability as a mate then they simply don't score.

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

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107 This of course reinforces their poignant and isolated station in life. 3 Suitable? No, neither Lennie is suitable  
108 for George and vice versa. The only suitability here is when one has to help the weak if they are strong. However,  
109 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  
110 maybe have a girl." 4

### 111 3 III.

112 Social Realist and Naturalist Methodologies: The Insinuation of American Capitalism in of Mice and Men  
113 This complaint foreshadows Steinbeck's strategy that leads this friendship to a negative end or at least the  
114 liberation of George after having protected his friend under the death shelter. Because George spends all his time  
115 and energy to contain his friend's caprices, the pain of being isolated in this task is more felt than when he could  
116 be alone but using the fruit of his effort in his own advantage. Therefore, George's altruist performance with  
117 Lennie becomes unpraise worthy because of the fact that George is also an indigent. It is in this perspective that  
118 this relationship could be laudable in the sense that George endeavors in his friend's satisfaction being himself in  
119 need of what he gives out. That is amply sufficient to celebrate this friendship because a good gift should not be  
120 with undesired thing. On the other hand, since it is obvious that because of Lennie George cannot progress or  
121 even have a girlfriend, the strategy of ending this friendship connotes with George's freedom to work rendering to  
122 his own needs, which is one of the main principles of individualism, self-reliance, and even the core of capitalism.

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

### 129 4 Individualism

130 and self-reliance receive emphasis in the context of the American character not only because of the individual  
131 freedom to choose, but 3 Rowland Molony, "Simple minds: Rowland Molony considers some of the many literary  
132 instances of the identification of male simple-mindedness with virtue." The English Review 13.3 (2003): 18+.  
133 Literature Resource Center. Web. 17 Sept. 2015. 4 John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, (New York: Penguin  
134 Books, 1994), p. 9. also for the fact that they delineate the country's economic system. Thus almost every  
135 character in *Of Mice and Men* has expressed, through actions or words, the need to act on their own choice for  
136 their future plans. This is understood either in the failure of one who has followed another character's advice or a  
137 group of workers disappointed because of their intent to demise capitalism. This section discusses the strategies  
138 through which Steinbeck insinuates his advocacy of and support to American capitalism.

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

142 "? You remember where we're going now?" Lennie looked startled and then in embarrassment hid his face  
143 against his knees. "I forgot again" "Jesus Christ," George said resignedly. "Welllook, we're gonna work on a  
144 ranch like the one we come from up north." 5 Though the main reason in this context may be that of security  
145 for this relocation, the general spirit of the displacement after the World's economic crisis of 1929 was that  
146 of life betterment and the pursuit of profits. "Driven by competition, individual capitalists seek competitive  
147 advantages within this spatial structure and therefore tend to be drawn or compelled to move to those locations  
148 where costs are lower or profit rates higher." 6 The main problem relating to the class division in the US is  
149 the clear disparities that even lead to the cruel treatment wield by the dominant class. However, as we could  
150 eventually imagine the differentiations in cultural and ethnic levels, the economic opportunities turn out to be  
151 the most observed measuring tape in the American society in the sense that requires from an individual the total  
152 submission to his/her employer. As John Carlos Rowe points out, "Far more likely to divide recent immigrants  
153 from US 'national culture,' as it is sometimes called, are social disparities and economic opportunities. Class  
154 hierarchies, in other words, are far more divisive of peoples in the United States [?] than language or culture."  
155 This is in the context of the American working class under the impact of the World economic crisis. And because  
156 she had confided in him, she moved closer to Lennie and sat beside him. 'Coulda been in the movies an' had nice  
157 clothes -all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me.  
158 When they had them previews I coulda went to them, an' spoke in the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent  
159 because I was in the pitcher. An' all them nice clothes like they wear. Because this guy says I was a natural.'

160 This implies how this character could not act according to her will or make a decision on the person to get  
161 married to. In some cases, one may be constrained to get married to unwilling person and turn out to be happy  
162 in the course of marital life. This is not the case of Curley's wife. She confides to Lennie that: 9 And this  
163 is because she did not marry the artist who could take her from place to place. Rather she married Curley  
164 under constraining circumstances. The consequences of this sad marriage are tangible. One character in the  
165 ranch informs George about the behavior of Curley's wife, while playing cards with Whit: "Whit laid down his  
166 cards impressively. 'Well, stick around an' keep your eyes open. You'll see plenty. She ain'tconcealin' nothing.

## 5 CONCLUSION

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167 I never seen nobody like her. She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody, I bet she even gives the stable  
168 buck the eye. I don't know what the hell she wants.” 10 Close attention to phrases used to define-free market,  
169 open competition, privately owned -soon reveals that the capitalist ideology in itself promotes a war among  
170 neighbors in its emphasis on the self before the community. Unlike communism or socialism, which both steer  
171 toward spreading wealth among the community, reducing the number of wealthy figureheads as compared to  
172 America, American capitalism reinforces isolation and deception as imperative in order to assure furthering the  
173 self toward capital gain. Because capitalism supports competition in an open market, people will naturally  
174 alienate themselves from others in competing for their personal goals.

175 Giving eye to everybody is conducive to unfaithfulness and loss of marriage. In her case this drove her to  
176 confide herself to Lennie to the point of allowing the latter to touch her hair that led to her death in Lennie's  
177 hands.

178 Through this representation Steinbeck suggests an individual's failure when relying on others in every aspect  
179 of human life. He rather reinforces their isolation in order to make them rely on their own effort and be free.  
180 That is one of the most important principles of American capitalism. Jonathan P. Davis remarks that: 11 Thus  
181 the potentially successful an individual becomes in isolation constitutes Steinbeck's strategy to insinuate the  
182 economic system of the US. This economic system, as well as nationalism is the guiding force for short stories'  
183 writers. Joseph Urgo asserts that: "A good deal of the vitality and energy associated with the American short  
184 story originates at the intersection of two fundamental forces in the United States: capitalism and nationalism." 12 Eric Paul, in "Clash of Capitalisms" compares the European capitalism and the Anglo-Saxon capitalism and  
185 finds that: "?the European model bears a striking resemblance to that of Japan because of the interventionist role  
186 of the state and regulations that impose restraints on competition and self-serving appetite. While the Rhenish  
187 model is not a workers' paradise, it is a more humane form of capitalism than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart."  
188 ??3 The furious competition in this form of capitalism reveals the predatory aspect of human character. The  
189 employer's relation with an employee is not only set against the economic progress of the latter but also looks  
190 down upon the inalienable rights of the employee to life and freedom. This is exemplified in *Of Mice and Men* by  
191 the attitude of Curley, the son of the ranch's owner toward the ranch hands. For their progress, Joyce Moss and  
192 George Wilson cite Steinbeck: "Most new arrivals to ranches were broke. Their employers operated stores at  
193 which the laborers could purchase food and other necessities on credit. As Steinbeck notes, this virtually enslaved  
194 the laborer: 'Thus he must work a second day to pay for his first, and so on. He is continually in debt. He must  
195 work' (Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, p. 35)."

196 It is in this perspective that the unkind treatment of workers can be notified in the American form of capitalism.  
197 So Steinbeck is not only insinuating the capitalist domination in the American economic system, but also  
198 describing how it functions. 14 On the other hand, workers lose their right to freedom once employed. Being  
199 the son of the owner drives Curley to think he deserves the right and the strength to shut up every mouth on  
200 the ranch. Considering the plight in the working place, Lennie required George: "Le's get outa here. It's mean  
201 here." We gotta stay,' George said shortly. 'Shut up now. The guys'llcomin' in." 15 Among many other examples  
202 in the novel through which John Steinbeck insinuates the American capitalism we can mention the death of the  
203 dream that almost all the ranch hands have. Born from George and Lennie's friendship, the dream of owning  
204 a private piece of land has gained the workers who have conversed with either George or Lennie. Due to the  
205 economic and physical hardships that employees face, the good idea This statement, made by George after he  
206 anticipates trouble, shows the impossible situation in which he and Lennie are caught. Though staying means  
207 trouble, leaving means starvation and hopelessness. would be to be self-employed. Thus joining the program to  
208 have a land without a master was quick and easy. Since this was not going to be joint-venture, it alluded to  
209 the beginning of a socialist or communist system where equality among individuals is more accentuated and the  
210 number of wealthy people less.

211 The suggestion of capitalism in Steinbeck's fiction is at the same time advocacy for this system in the country.  
212 Because the period of World economic crisis of 1929 witnessed British loss of the World hegemony, the US had  
213 the chance to emerge as a hegemon with a particular economic system. According to Theodore H. Cohn, The  
214 disastrous experience of the interwar period resulted partly from a lack of economic leadership, and hegemonic  
215 stability theorists argue that a global hegemon increases the likelihood that there will be a more stable, open  
216 international economy.

217 According to these theorists, British was the global hegemon in the nineteenth century. During the interwar  
218 period, however, Britain was no longer able, and the United States was not yet willing to assume the hegemonic  
219 duties of promoting freer trade and an open, stable economic system. ??6 IV.

## 221 5 Conclusion

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

228 The study of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* reveals, among many other assumptions, the fact that this

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229 novel constitutes an indirect address to the United States' economic system that was emerging during the period  
230 of the World economic crisis. Through the reactions of various characters involved in this fictitious work, it is  
231 obvious that the writer is insinuating, in his nationalist endeavor, the existence of capitalism as an economic  
232 system specific for the United States. And he excludes, through his methodology, the other potential economic  
233 systems, such as communism and socialism that are attempting to overtake the nation when British is losing the  
World economic control. <sup>1 2 3 4</sup>

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5 Ibid. pp. 7-8.

[Note: 6 David Harvey. '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 stoleyur 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 '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.]

Figure 1:

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<sup>1</sup>Attell, Kevin. "An overview of Of Mice and Men."Literature Resource Center. Detroit: Gale, 2015. Literature Resource Center.

<sup>2</sup>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

<sup>3</sup>John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 87.9 Ibid. pp. 87-88.

<sup>4</sup>Eric Paul. "Clash of Capitalisms" (ISSA Review, Volume 6 Nr.1 2007) p. 33.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

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235 .1 Year 2015

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

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

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