

## VICTIMS OF SELF-DELUSION IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *OF MICE AND MEN*: A LACANIAN READING

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**ABSTRACT:** *John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men has focused on the economic conditions of workers of the time whose quest for land were opposed by superior forces of upper-class. With his unique characterization, Steinbeck revealed many facts about characters' personalities and displayed how each member of different classes was dealing with his or her life at the great depression era. The present article has demonstrated how selected characters in Of Mice and Men were victims of self-delusion by manifesting the individual character's unconscious motivational sources and has tried to analyze different characters through Lacanian psychoanalysis and the three Lacanian orders. Lennie, in Of Mice and Men was similar to an infant in the imaginary order. Self-delusion regarding the achievement of the Lacanian Real occurred in the symbolic order. Lacan illustrated how the characters were made through the symbolic order and ascertained their search for object petit a by justifying characters' emotions, dreams and actions. George and Candy would be represented and analyzed through the symbolic order of Lacan. The purpose of this article has been to show how the characters' search for The American dream (Lacanian Real) gave them life but they never managed to fulfill it. This failure caused them to start facing their displacement in society. Through Lacanian lenses, the characters failed the dream that either literally or figuratively was equivalent to their death. Curley's wife was a great representative of failure in achieving object petit a. In the present article, she has been fully analyzed in the way she tried to cope with this failure.*

**KEYWORDS:** Great Depression, Imaginary Order, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Lacanian Real, Symbolic Order, object petit a

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### INTRODUCTION

The chief argument of this article has rested on psychoanalytical criticism of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* with the purpose of uncovering the unconscious motivations of its principle characters by using Lacanian lenses. In *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Steinbeck very masterfully has made use of characterization to display how different members of social class were facing the same time frame and were totally affected by it. Due to its brilliant portrayal of delusions that individuals face during the era of great depression (1929-39), the great economic downturn in the history of industrialized world, *Of Mice and Men* was adapted several times on screen in different countries.

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck truly illuminated how each persona is characterized in conformity with his or her distinct psychoanalytical properties and features, which disclosed the extent of Steinbeck's potential in realizing human deceptive desires. Regarding the concept of self-delusion, Steinbeck (1962) has declared that "I suppose our capacity for self-delusion

is boundless” (p.11). With respects to the great capacity of its adaptations, it has become utterly unjustifiable to only focus on the overall features of the novella and overlook its other noteworthy implications. Deriving from his own experiences and through stories of real people, Steinbeck undertook to launch a literary work which besides its typical themes aims at approaching his characterization with a desire to clarify their realistic features. This sort of realism in the production of real-like characters has indicated their specific views, moods and actions.

Although coming from diverse social classes, it has been interesting to note that characters made use of similar language. It was almost as if Steinbeck used slangs and vulgar language as an equalizing force that gave the pleasure of dealing with authentic sense of characters. The main characters in this novella were relatively complex and have got their own attitudes towards life, which demonstrated their way of dealing with their matters and their interpersonal relationships with other characters. In the present article, the researcher has aimed at depicting the relation of self-delusion of characters in *Of Mice and Men* in their search for American dream with regards to Lacanian Psychoanalytical criticism in order to figure out their unconscious motivations. This approach has shed some light on the Psychoanalytic feature of failing characters in their search for the American dream, as well as depicting how the period of great depression of America leded people to a negative economic state and its devastating effects on different classes of civilization.

*Of Mice and Men* has many characters who were each dealing with their thoughts, surroundings and desires in their own way. John Steinbeck as a master of characterization has made use of the vocabulary and language that the normal working class mass of people of Depression era of America would speak. Steinbeck used many slangs and vulgarities to provide the pleasure of dealing with authentic sense of characters. In analyzing *Of Mice and Men*, the researcher has endeavored to put the main characters (George, Lennie, Candy and Curley’s wife) at the center of attention and by exploring the nature of their individual psychology accounts for delusion in their perspective and also in their relations to each other, which is outlined in their particular behavior and words they use.

In the first two parts of this article, the researcher has attempted to argue how George Milton and Lennie Small, the two migrant workers of this story, can be put into psychoanalytical criticism of Lacan. By bringing into light their psychoanalytical state, it has become possible to disclose the point that George Milton played a superior role in this article's purpose of displaying characters' self-delusion in their desire to achieve American dream. In other words, the researcher's investigation into the unconscious motivation of these characters has helped the understanding that the supposed American dream in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, was not George and Lennie's shared dream but really George's dream alone, since he has talked so much about his dream to Lennie but Lennie did not always realize what he was talking about. In the second part of this article entitled as: Lennie Small and the imaginary Order, Lennie has been represented and analyzed as a character that was not capable of formulating such complex dream and he seemingly imagined this dream only in terms of having rabbits to nourish and fondle. The third part of the article has analyzed Candy's psychoanalytical state and his position as an old migrant worker who has worked hard in the great depression era and how such hopeless and lonely character started to shape a dream after meeting with George and Lennie and getting to know their plan for a farm. In part four, the researcher has considered

Curley's wife psychoanalysis worthy to be discussed and has explained how the American dream of going to Hollywood led her to her own downfall.

*Of Mice and Men* has been re-read and re-interpreted in the light of various theories. Since the researcher in this article has applied Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism to *Of Mice and Men*, here it would be necessary to bring a brief account of the works, which have looked at it from other perspectives. Carl Bailey in his *'He's dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy': A psycholinguistic Analysis of Steinbeck's Lennie Small*, considered the question of Lennie's retardation attempts to use linguistic methods of inquiry in an analysis of the dialogue that Steinbeck has used for Lennie. Michael Henry Short in his thesis applied *A Stylistic Analysis of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*. V. M. Saranya in her *American Reverie in John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men'* has tried to investigate the deep rooted cultural imbalance of American individuals. Mark Spilka also, in *Gender in of Mice and Men* has examined the work through gender analysis. Fredrik Eliasson in his *Naturalism and friendship in Of Mice and Men*, has attempted to discuss how naturalism and friendship were seen through the novella. Rara Novita in her *Alienation of Modern Man in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, has tried to analyze the alienation of George Milton. Also Reza Mirlohi, Iranian script writer and director has written an adaptation of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in his film *Topoli*.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The significance of this article has been to apply a Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism to each of the aforementioned individual characters in order to demonstrate their delusional state and understand what stage these different characters were at, from the beginning to the end in *Of Mice and Men*. According to Myers (2003), In the hands of Lacan, however, psychoanalysis assumes cosmic ambitions, vaulting over the boundaries of its own discipline and engaging with politics, philosophy, literature, science, religion and almost every other field of learning to form a vast theory that has a hand in analyzing every arena of endeavor in which human beings take part. (p. 20). For Lacan, "the human psyche consists of three parts, or orders: the imaginary order, the symbolic order, and the real order" (Bressler, 2011, p.134), also most of Lacanian concepts were defined with connection to these three orders. Vanheule (2011) declared, "Pivotal in the mid-1970s is his idea that the dimensions of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary (RSI) should not be thought of as separate, but as dimensions that are integrated and tied together" (p.100).

According to Lacan, the imaginary order was the narcissism through which the human subject shaped fantasy images of both himself and his ideal object petit or object of desire. For Lacan, imaginary order was the first phase that the child went through. The reason it has been called imaginary was because at this phase, the child identified with the images that were mirrored back to him from the environment. These images shaped the child identity or led to subject formation. The imaginary and symbolic were inseparably entangled and worked in tension with the real. The symbolic order has been identified with language. According to Lacan's most famous saying "unconscious is structured like a language" (Habib, 2008, p.590). This could be interpreted as shown: the unconscious was mirrored and created through language and its function was similar to language. When the subject entered the symbolic order, it became fragmented and lived with an illusion to reach the complete whole it lost when it entered the symbolic; thus, it pushed itself to the limits to reach the greatness held by the big Other (Lacanian Real) or the symbolic universe. Object petit a was the lost object that the subject looked for in the Other, but it would never be found. This has given the subject purpose

and motivation, however, the moment the subject reached what it considered as its purpose, the subject would not be satisfied and this point has been similar to peeling away the layers of onion in which no hard kernel could be found.

Lacan looked for the remote and unattainable part of human psyche known as Lacanian Real. It has been good to mention that Lacanian Real was different from the real the literal meaning that the word had:

Real is as that which is beyond all our meaning- making systems, that which lies outside the world created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence. That is, the Real is the uninterpretable dimension of existence; it is existence without the filters and buffers of our signifying, or meaning-making, systems. For example, the Real is that experience we have, perhaps on a daily basis even if it's only for a moment, when we feel that there is no purpose or meaning to life. (Homer, 2005, p.32) . This statement signified the importance of the Real order that Lacan has introduced in his Psychoanalytic criticism. It became clear that Lacan regarded of the two orders of imaginary and symbolic as bound up with this order. Thus, the symbolic order was mainly responsible for injecting negativities of absence of object petit a into the Real.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### A) George Milton and the Lacanian Real

Steinbeck probably picked George Milton's name to refer to Milton's *Paradise Lost* in order to refer to Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden due to whose fall, mankind is doomed to be alone and be on earth as a lonely being. In this part, the researcher has attempted to elaborate the similarities that exist between George's life and the stages of an infant's life in achieving the Lacanian Real. George is the character who went through changes through the story progression by trying to find his way out in this world by picturing an ideal dream of having a farm and a life of his own known as Lacanian Real. In the beginning of *Of Mice and Men*, George Milton is described as a lonely ranch worker who has got nothing to look forward to and is similar to an infant in the way he thinks of himself as a whole with the destitute of the great depression era. George's only chance in avoiding that fate and passing through the symbolic order and achieving Lacanian Real was rooted in his relationship with Lennie and this was what made them different from other men who were shown as lonely characters throughout the plot.

It is of great importance to notice how it seems Lennie though being dumb, big and annoying was the only reason that made George walk towards Lacanian Real for a period of time. Although George did not realize the importance of having Lennie in his life when he gets tempered and wishes for an ideal life he might reach without Lennie's existence.

I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cathouse all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An' I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool.' Lennie knelt and looked over the fire at the angry George. And Lennie's face was drawn in with terror. 'An' whatta I got,' George went on furiously. 'I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time. (Steinbeck, 1994, p.89)

George obviously misjudged the importance Lennie played in his life. According to Lacan, George's obsession of having an ideal life without Lennie, when he uttered his ideal in his temper enabled him to escape the lack in his achievement of the American dream known as Lacanian Real. To put it in other words of Lacan, this obsession of George of getting rid of Lennie was a new object petit that George shaped for a temporary period of time.

However, the deep irony of George's illusive dream of drinking and whoring without having any responsibility towards Lennie in the end of the novel was shown to be a great lie which displayed the impossibility of pursuing the Real or the ideal world of Lacan. George in the end of the novel was free to pursue that dream but now he had no more desire of achieving it. After Lennie dies, George became like everyone else, a lost soul of the great depression, a homeless migrant worker who traveled from farm to farm in search of menial work. He started to have nothing to live for and he no more expected any improvements in situation around him. Applying Lacanian logic to what George did, it can be inferred that George's self-delusion is rooted in the incapacity to signify his own existence as a subject in relation to the Lacanian Real. The chain of object petit a or the little others cannot designate what was at stake for George upon his clash of the dream or better say Lacanian Real.

### **B) Lennie Small and the Imaginary Order**

Steinbeck's realistic portrayal of Lennie Small as a mentally disabled character who was the least dynamic throughout the entire story and stuck in Lacan's imaginary order is quite impressive. Lennie's Retardation has been verified by his special retarded speech and repetitious acts, also one interesting truth to notice could be that Lennie and Steinbeck were both considered as compulsive repeaters since Steinbeck both repeats words and phrases along with gestures, conversations, themes and images. Throughout the story, Lennie's retardation explained the reason he did wrong deeds and he stayed stuck in the imaginary order of Lacan. According to the dialogue that George had with Slim, Lennie "is dumb as hell but he ain't crazy" (Steinbeck, 1994, p.19). Lennie's dream had only one aspect that he was obsessed with and that was having a small rabbit hutch where he could tend rabbits. This character stayed in his mirror stage in the imaginary order and only saw a surface of what he wanted but he has not totally built a language through which he could achieve his dream.

According to one of Lacan's repeated formulas: "man's desire is the desire of the (m) Other" (Evans, 1996, p.39), which has both meanings of desire of the Other and the object of Other's desire and could be applicable to Lennie's case. The child should look through his mother's eyes to infer what he desires and identifying his mother's desired object enables the child to gain his own recognition. In this story Lennie gained recognition of his own desire by listening to what George repeatedly told him as a motivation of their achievement of the dream. Lennie imitated George like a toddler who imitates his mother in Lacan's imaginary order. When George complained and acted as a parental figure, Lennie started to cry like a baby. Lennie's sole dream was to tend rabbits on a farm that he and George would own and so this dream helped Lennie establish his complete innocence and it symbolized not only the innocence but also the downfall of innocence in a cruel world. Lennie's innocence kept the dream alive but his retarded character made the dream impossible to realize.

Steinbeck has put emphasis on Lennie's self-delusional nature by mentioning the presence of Lennie's Aunt Clara who played the role of mother figure for Lennie and gave him mice because she knew how he enjoyed petting their fair and the talking about a giant rabbit that Lennie imagined to have when George or the father figure would own a farm. Although Lennie

has a short memory, the story of George and his dream was a fact that he knew by heart. George tried hard to keep the dream alive for him, while George himself never really believed in this farm; Lennie embraced this dream like a little child in the imaginary order who considered himself as one with the mother. Thus, Lennie was the source that kept George excited.

However, throughout the novel, Lennie kept disappointing George. He knew he had messed up, but it was pretty sure he did not understand the extent to which he was getting in the way of his and George's dream. In these lines Steinbeck (1994) has displayed how George had likely resigned from the dream when he saw Lennie repeating the deeds he was not supposed to do like that of a child.

Lennie said, 'George.'

'Yeah?'

'I done another bad thing.'

'It don't make no difference,' George said, and he fell silent again. (p.34)

George as the parent figure and Lennie as the child in Lacanian Psychoanalysis tried to delude themselves of their position in the world but the Lacan's real order known as the American dream always seemed very distant for them and thus was never achieved. However, when Lennie was shot to death by George in the final chapter, Steinbeck was seemingly pleased with the fact that the world got to know that a gentle giant who was like a child should have not been morally culpable and should have not been subject to death.

### C) Candy and the Symbolic Order

Candy's assembly with George and Lennie and his significant role in providing the money needed to achieve the dream was analogous to Lacan's idea of searching for unity through the symbolic order. In this part, the researcher has been seeking to demonstrate the Lacanian orders that Candy went through before and after recognizing George and Lennie's American dream of owning a farm and entering the symbolic order of Lacan. Before joining George and Lennie, Candy was presented as an old ranch worker who spent the best time of his life working on someone else's ranch and besides lost his hand as a result of a farm accident. He was a great representative of the old working class of the great depression era. He was mainly worried that his boss would soon declare him as useless and ask him to leave the ranch. He has been revealed as a great representative of worker's position in that era when he declared: "A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ast no questions" (Steinbeck, 1994, p.67). This gives a clear definition of an isolated person in the Depression era that was disposed of his most basic right which was his freedom of speech. Steinbeck suggested that the isolation of these characters had a root in their silences. Also, Candy's dog served as a harsh reminder of the destiny that awaited anyone who was no more of use. His dog was his only company in here. Before meeting George and Lennie, there came a sense that Candy's dream was never fulfilled because of his being old and disabled. He was afraid of being disposed of like his dog. He had given up all hope to achieve his American dream. When Carlson suggested putting an end to Candy's dog's life, Candy abdicated the responsibility to Carlson. But later in the story he regretted his decision of not giving an end to the dog's life by himself. This line has suggested a foreshadowing for George's decision to take responsibility for Lennie's death.

Analyzing Candy's character through Lacanian psychoanalysis, one could easily understand that he was a subject of Lacan's symbolic order. This matter was produced by his ego as a scape from his reality. For Lacan, when the infant fell into language, his unconscious was materialized. The language frame work that the infant entered created a paradox for him. This enabled him the possibility of communication. But at the same time it alienated the individual.

Zizek encapsulated this idea when he wrote "for Lacan, language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us" (Zizek, 1992, pp.11-12). This Language consisted of object petit a that was structured into a symbolic order. The symbolic order was considered as other to the subject. Thus, Lacan conceived of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other and then the individual became alienated in language. When Candy met George and Lennie, he was faced with a new language. He tried so hard to join and become a part of their American dream. In the Depression era, this was the only way one could manage to escape his reality.

Even in the end of *Of Mice and Men*, one can notice, Candy was so affected by the dream that while Lennie has killed Curley's wife, Candy was left in despair and pleaded for George and himself to keep going and buy the farm as it was planned when he stated "Now Candy spoke his greatest fear. 'You an' me can get that little place, can't we, George? You an' me can go there an' live nice, can't we, George? Can't we?'" Before George answered, Candy dropped his head and looked down at the hay. He knew" (Steinbeck, 1994, p.47).

Shaping a self-delusion towards a dream was the only way such characters could keep going and hope for a better future when they were in the symbolic order. In other words, according to Lacan, Candy was shaping the ideal object petit a of owning a farm as an elusive way of getting away from the harsh reality of his life. Candy was perhaps the most tragic figure in this novel since he was a well representative of the future of hard working migrants who ended in failure. No matter how hard they tried, they never managed to reach their dream of having a peaceful life. Such characters in the depression era were easily gotten rid of when they were no more of use in the farming business of the rich.

#### **D) Curley's wife and object petit a**

Curley's wife was a great representative of women and their social class in the great depression era of America who tended to dream continually in order to run away from her unattained Lacanian object petit a. After a failure in her American dream of becoming a famous actress in Hollywood, she married Curley to get away from her mother whom she assumed had stolen her offer letter of Hollywood. She has been given no clear name throughout the novel because she was considered only as one of Curley's possessions. She was looking for her intangible American dream; however, according to Lacanian Psychoanalysis when the picture changed, she entered a phase of disappointment and bitterness. After her failure, the only way she could keep going on was by convincing herself that her mother rubbed her of chance of achieving her object petit a. She was also depicted a character who was so self-obsessed that she could not clearly judge herself and her reality.

Curley's wife's bitterness in her unattainability of object petit a or her object of desire, led her to feel superior and mock ranch workers and call them weak ones who were not allowed to go to the brothel. She also took it out on Lennie's mental disability, Candy's deteriorating physical ability and also Crooks skin color. By means of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it could be inferred that she seemingly did this to feel better after her failure. On the other hand her loneliness was expressed when she acted as if she was jealous of Curley's manhood and freedom. When she did not get the attention that she needed from Curley, she acted as a tramp around ranch workers. Looking at what she did with Lacanian lenses it could be understood that this act of her might be tied back with her Oedipal attachments with her mother, since her mother did not believe in her ability of success. Seemingly, she was on purposely reenacting her relationship with her mother through the relation with Curley.

Curley's wife's dissatisfaction has been once again apparent after her marriage with Curley. Curley was a bad tempered character and thus Curley's wife became a lonely character who seemingly tried her best to get away from this reality when she deliberately flirted with ranch workers. According to Lacan, displacement of characters corresponded to their unconscious. He believed that the unconscious has the same structure of a language and displacement is operated in the mind unconsciously. When displacement in character's mind happened, Curley's wife started getting involved with wishes, ideas and emotions that were transferred from their original form into a more acceptable substitute.

In *Of Mice and Men*, when Curley's wife faced failure, she started flirting with ranch workers in order to get acceptance from them as a substitution for Hollywood praises. It has become apparent that what Curley's wife experiences as a whole or the the object petit a, was due to errors in her perspective and all her struggles were ostensibly due to her position as the subject. Throughout *Of Mice and Men*, Curley's wife mentioned her American dream to Lennie as: 'I tell you I ain't used to livin' like this. I coulda made somethin' of myself.' She said darkly, 'Maybe I will yet.' And then her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away. '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' 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.' (Steinbeck, 1994, p.37) This revealed Curley's wife's desire of entering Hollywood; yet, she has not been much of a success. Her dream of getting noticed was impossible to her so she was dragged away from this dream and could no more fulfill it. When Lennie killed her in the barn, it demonstrated the fact that failure in American dream could be a considered a form of death by itself.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this article has been to apply Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in order to shed some light on the unconscious aspects of the main characters and the way their actions were the result of their unconscious pathological motivations rather than their own conscious intentions. In order to come to an authentic understanding of the true motivations of the characters we need to get a clear look on their conscious actions. In order to exemplify such content analysis in Steinbeck in his *Of Mice and Men*, the researcher has put the main characters of this novel at the center of attention. George, Lennie, Candy and Curley's wife were all dealing with their object petit a, or desires in the great depression era in their own way. By exploring their unconscious mind and their behavior, the researcher has demonstrated how these characters were each individually affected psychoanalytically in this era. After presenting a brief idea about Lacanian psychoanalysis, the researcher has tried to show how each characters of this novella were victims of self-delusion and how all of them failed in their achievement of the American dream. This article has established how the illusion of achieving American dream led characters to their connection together and how it gave them an ambition to move forward. On the other hand, the harsh fact of their tragic failure was shown greatly and was discussed that failure in achieving the dream for the characters in this novel could be considered as death itself.

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