

# **The Great Depression in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men***

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje témata spojená s Velkou hospodářskou krizí v díle Johna Steinbecka *O myších a lidech* (1937). První část práce popisuje příčiny a průběh Velké hospodářské krize ve Spojených státech amerických a definuje Johna Steinbecka v kontextu americké literatury Velké hospodářské krize. Druhá část práce analyzuje stěžejní témata v tomto díle a demonstruje je na jeho postavách. Práce dochází k závěru, že John Steinbeck vylíčil Velkou hospodářskou krizi jako tvůrce chudých a osamělých lidí, kteří nakonec ztratí své sny, morálku a také identitu.

Klíčová slova: Velká hospodářská krize, John Steinbeck, *O myších a lidech*, Kalifornie, námezdní dělníci, přátelství, samota, americký sen, moc, chudoba

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis analyses the themes connected with the Great Depression in the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck. The first part of the thesis describes the causes and the course of the Great Depression in the United States of America, and it defines John Steinbeck in the context of American literature of the Great Depression. The second part of the thesis analyses major themes in the novella, and it demonstrates them on the characters. The thesis comes to the conclusion that John Steinbeck portrayed the Great Depression as a generator that created poor and lonely people who eventually lost their dreams, their morality and also identity.

Keywords: Great Depression, John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, California, migrant workers, friendship, loneliness, American Dream, power, poverty

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## INTRODUCTION

“When two people meet, each one is changed by the other so you’ve got two new people”

– John Steinbeck

In the 1930s, the United States of America were hit by the most severe economic recession in history. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which was only one of the causes of the Great Depression, the U.S. unemployment rate rose to alarming numbers, many banks and companies went bankrupt and many people lost their homes. At the time of the crash, the agriculture was already in recession, as it suffered from low prices for the crops. In the 1930s, the situation even worsened with the Dust Bowl, a natural disaster of storms from topsoil on the Great Plains, which drove many people from their homes to the West, mainly to California, hoping to start a better life there.

John Steinbeck was an author who wrote about economic and moral consequences of the Depression. *Of Mice and Men* (1937), one of his ‘labour trilogy’, deals with the labouring class in California.

To analyse this novella, it is important to understand the background of the Great Depression – that is why its causes, course and the lives of American people during the crisis are described in the first chapter of this thesis. Then, the thesis focuses on John Steinbeck, who was born in California’s Salinas, and it defines him in the context of American literature of the Great Depression. Setting in California plays a crucial role in the analysed novella.

The main part of this thesis, the thematic analysis of the Great Depression in *Of Mice and Men*, is based on close reading of this novella. It examines several themes that are connected with the Depression, such as loneliness, poverty and unfulfilled dreams. It analyses the devastating impact of the Great Depression on the nation’s society, as it is illustrated in the characters of the novella.

At the time of the Great Depression, majority of Americans experienced many hardships. Nevertheless, some of them, like the characters of *Of Mice and Men*, still believed that there was an opportunity to succeed economically and to fulfil their American dream.

This thesis is going to argue that John Steinbeck portrayed the Depression as a generator that created poor and lonely people who eventually lost their dreams, their morality and also identity.

## 1 THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was an economic slump that originated in the United States of America after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. This October stock market crash initiated one of the longest and hardest economic declines in the history, which lasted more than ten years and which was finally ended when the Second World War burst out.

### 1.1 Before the Great Depression

Before the Great Depression, it was a time of economic prosperity in the USA. The era that started two years after the First World War and ended in 1929 is often referred to as the 'Roaring Twenties'. This era, also called the 'Jazz Age', was characterized by technological innovations and inventions, the Florida land boom, and the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> During that time, American total wealth more than doubled, but the prosperity was superficial, as only two per cent of the U.S. population got 28 percent of the national income, while the lower sixty percent received bare 24 percent.<sup>2</sup>

After the World War I, American businesses and industries were flourishing. A lot of people began to buy products on credit, as well as stock of companies.<sup>3</sup> The economic situation was favourable to do so: the more stock a company sells, the higher is its value. That is why many people invested their money in stock market; they believed it would continue to grow.

The economic prosperity was based on a few main industries, especially on car industry, construction, and household appliances.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s, about 447 thousand people were in the employ of automotive factories and the production of automobile companies more than doubled over this decade. The prices of cars were low, while the wages of people were higher, so almost every household owed a car.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by 1927, most

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<sup>1</sup> See Rodney P. Carlisle, *Handbook to Life in America: The Roaring Twenties 1920 to 1929* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), ix.

<sup>2</sup> See Gary B. Nash, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 709.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Burgan, *The Great Depression: An Interactive History Adventure* (Mankato: Capstone Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Carol Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 526.

<sup>5</sup> See Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13-14.

of American homes had been wired for electricity and had newly invented refrigerator, washing machine or vacuum cleaner.<sup>6</sup>

The term 'Roaring Twenties' applied especially for young people in American big cities. Nevertheless, for many people in villages it was years of social tension, prohibition, and consumer society. Also, for the first time, the population in American cities and towns was higher than in rural areas, because people hoped that they would find a better job in some of the growing industrial company.<sup>7</sup> As far as people who lived in villages and some minorities are concerned, their wages were not higher, nor their savings. It especially applied to farmers, who had to produce more and more food in the 1920s, while the prices for their product were continuously going down.

In 1927, housing construction and car sales caught up with their demand and there were not enough people who would buy and consume.<sup>8</sup> It resulted in huge increase in companies' stores, so the pace of consumption decreased. The worsening situation in the midst of 1929 was evidenced in a drop of production and employment, and other macroeconomic indicators. Nevertheless, the stock market thrived, because investors and speculators continued to buy on margin as brokerage companies encouraged American people to buy stocks on easy credit.

## 1.2 Wall Street Crash of 1929 and Other Causes of the Depression

Consumer spending fell in the summer of 1929, and at the same time the unsold products started to accumulate and stock prices kept increasing, so the nation's economy went into a recession. On September 5, 1929, the stock prices dropped, and they continued declining until October.<sup>9</sup>

On October 24, 1929, stock prices plummeted and investors started trading their shares on a mass scale. This day became known as 'Black Thursday' or the 'Great Crash'. Five days later, on Monday, October 28, the prices fell again and on 'Black Tuesday',

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<sup>6</sup> See Susan E. Hamen, *The New Deal* (Edina: ABDO Publishing Company, 2011), 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Carlisle, *Handbook to Life in America: The Roaring Twenties 1920 to 1929*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> See George Brown Tindall, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2000), 556.

<sup>9</sup> See *Ibid.*

October 29, the slump in prices was drastic, and record 16 410 030 shares were traded. The prices kept plunging in November as well.<sup>10</sup>

When the stock market crashed, American brokers and banks wanted their loans to be repaid, in view of the fact that their resources were decreasing.<sup>11</sup> But borrowers could not give the money back, because their stock had already lost its value.

Banks in the United States were not able to deal with the crash. People immediately started to withdraw their money but banks did not have enough funds, so American banks began to go out of business and most savings of the upper and middle classes disappeared.<sup>12</sup>

The crash had a worldwide impact. American banks lent billions of dollars to European countries during and after World War I, and the banks started to recall these loans as well. Germany and Austria paid war reparations to the United Kingdom and France, while these two countries had many loans to the United States, so the economies of Europe and the USA were interconnected.<sup>13</sup> This had a destructive effect on the European economy and the most of the western countries went into recession.

The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of June 1930 even worsened the global situation. After the Wall Street Crash, Congress wanted to protect American businesses from foreign competition by introducing this Act, which set the U.S. tariffs rates to the highest levels in the history.<sup>14</sup> As it is stated on the official website of the U.S. Department of State “U.S. imports from Europe declined from a 1929 high of \$1,334 million to just \$390 million in 1932, while U.S. exports to Europe fell from \$2,341 million in 1929 to \$784 million in 1932”.<sup>15</sup> This policy had a catastrophic impact on the international trade and by 1931; the originally American depression had become a world depression.

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<sup>10</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 527.

<sup>11</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 558.

<sup>14</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 527.

<sup>15</sup> “Smoot-Hawley Tariff,” U.S. Department of State, Accessed March 19, 2016, [http://future.state.gov/when/timeline/1921\\_timeline/smoot\\_tariff.html](http://future.state.gov/when/timeline/1921_timeline/smoot_tariff.html).

### 1.3 During the Great Depression

The Great Depression initiated great changes in the United States. Mainly, it caused big unemployment, which grew rapidly as people kept losing their jobs. Before the crisis, there were 1.6 million people unemployed, which was about 3 % of the total U.S. population. Nevertheless, in 1933, the unemployment rate rose to alarming 25 %, which means that about 12.8 million people were out of job.<sup>16</sup> Those included 200,000 teachers, therefore 2,000 schools, especially in rural areas, did not open. As a result, a number of children who did not attend school reached 2.3 million.<sup>17</sup>

The situation was very serious in agriculture. As it was already mentioned, farmers suffered from low prices for their products even before the stock market crash, and the depression affected them significantly. From 1930 to 1934, almost one million farms passed from owners' to creditors' possession.<sup>18</sup>

The United States were in the worst economic depression in history. People lost their life savings, as about nine thousand American banks were closed.<sup>19</sup> The gross national product of the United States fell by 25 percent in three years.<sup>20</sup> The wages of workers fell by 40 percent; employed people did not have enough money to support themselves, as well as their families. Many Americans started losing their homes and had to live on the streets.

At that time, Herbert Hoover from the Republican Party held the position of president. He tried to expand the role of the federal government in order to cope with the Depression by taking several measures, such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Its aim was to stimulate the nation's economy, with the help of federal government, by lending money to banks and other businesses. However, the legislation had the opposite effect since the economy was getting worse.

The crisis influenced the political situation. People lost their faith in President Hoover and Republicans' methods to stimulate the economy. In the following presidential election won in a landslide Democratic Party candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt with his program of economic recovery and reforms, the New Deal, garnering 57.4 percent. Herbert

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<sup>16</sup> See Tindall, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických*, 557.

<sup>17</sup> See Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 317.

<sup>18</sup> See Svatava Raková and Josef Opatrný. *USA* (Prague: Libri, 2003), 171.

<sup>19</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 555.

Hoover carried only six states.<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt introduced his program in public at the beginning of his election campaign on July 2, 1932, and he began to put in in practice shortly afterwards he took his office in March, 1933.<sup>22</sup>

The period of New Deal can be separate into two stretches of time. The first stretch, so called the First New Deal, lasted from 1933 to 1935 and it might be defined as period of legislative measures for the poor and unemployed. Especially in the first one hundred days of his administration, Roosevelt implemented a lot of bills, namely the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 regarding reforms of banking, the National Industrial Recovery Act, and the Securities Act. He also abandoned the gold standard, so the American dollar was no longer convertible into gold.<sup>23</sup>

Except for saving the banking system and aid for the unemployed, Roosevelt accepted agricultural laws. By the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, farmers were paid subsidies in order to not to plant.<sup>24</sup> Under the terms of this Act, a national planning board decided to remove some land from production, and some crops like wheat, cotton, corn, hogs, tobacco and rice, were reduced in order to increase their price.

The period of the Second New Deal followed, lasting from 1935 to 1939. For this period, some specific projects were typical.<sup>25</sup> In April 1935, the Works Progress Administration was launched, and its purpose was to provide jobs for unemployed people in public sector, so new highways, schools, parks, bridges etc. were built. Also, two Acts were installed in 1935: the National Labor Relations Act, which enabled workers to create and join labour unions and bargain altogether with their superiors; and the Social Security Act, which established pension system for retired people and unemployment insurance.

Nevertheless, Roosevelt's New Deal and his special programs and laws did not lead to economic recovery, even though it strengthened the federal government. The Depression lasted until the United States went to World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. When USA entered the war, the economic situation started

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<sup>21</sup> See Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 538.

<sup>22</sup> See Raková and Opatrný, *USA*, 173.

<sup>23</sup> See Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>24</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 545.

<sup>25</sup> See Sidney M. Milis and Jerome M. Mileur, *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 102.

improving, as there was industrial boom caused by the need of arms industry.<sup>26</sup> Unemployment rate began to decrease and the nation's economy grew stronger.

#### 1.4 People in Hard Times

The Great Depression changed the lives of all people in the United States. The economic crisis enhanced the opinion that women should stay at home and take care of children. Since there were not jobs for all people, many Americans believed that the man should go to work, and if a woman is married, she should not accept any job. In addition to that, between 1932 and 1937, for more than one member of a family was not legal to be employed in a federal civil service job.<sup>27</sup>

However, many single and married women worked during the Great Depression. Families simply needed more money, so it is estimated that 25 percent more white women were employed than before the Depression.<sup>28</sup> The women living in rural areas, whereas, were forced to stay on the farm, and faced to foreclosures and drought that was destroying their farms.<sup>29</sup>

The Depression evinced in family values. For the first time in the history, both the marriage rate and the birth rate went down, as well as the divorce rate. People could not afford them. However, marriages were usually only delayed. Divorces were too expensive for some people, and informal break-ups of marriages were more typical, because men out of job could not often stand the humiliation of being incapable to support the family.<sup>30</sup>

Some people believed that the economic crisis also caused a downgrade in family values and morality.<sup>31</sup> The number of abortions grew. There were many reports of deviant sexual activities. At the same time, a lot of people turned to God and the number of people who went to church increased.

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<sup>26</sup> See Michael A. Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209.

<sup>27</sup> See Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 562.

<sup>28</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 536.

<sup>30</sup> See Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 563.

<sup>31</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 534.

## 1.5 The Dust Bowl and Migrant Farmers

At the time of Wall Street Crash, agriculture was already in crisis. In 1930s, the situation worsened because the Mississippi valley suffered from record heat waves and below-average rainfall, and the drought spread to the South and Midwest. The region of Great Plains became known as the 'Dust Bowl', as wind eroded millions of acres of cropland and whipped up clouds of dust from topsoil.<sup>32</sup>

The Dust Bowl lasted from 1931 to 1939 and it was a great natural and economic disaster. The waves of dust sometimes extended for more than 320 kilometres across and almost 2.5 kilometres high. In 1938, the storms on the Great Plains were the worst and the topsoil in the air was getting into people's homes, covering everything.<sup>33</sup> During the decade, thousands of people died from "dust pneumonia". Some 10 thousand farm houses were left and 3.5 million people joined a large migration to the West.<sup>34</sup>

Farmers were partly to blame. They used bad practices like deep ploughing, which cause that a great amount of land was open to erosion. They also used land that was not suitable for farming, as they had stripped the land of its grass and when there was no grass, the soil could not be held in place.<sup>35</sup> So when the wind came, the unstrengthen topsoil was blown off.

Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri were hit the most. Years of drought, storms and failed farming forced families to leave the Great Plains and migrate to the West, especially to California, to search for work.<sup>36</sup> For them, California was the Promised Land, as there were rumours and advertisements of steady work and good wages in California. But these agricultural migrants, often named as 'Arkies' or 'Okies' because they usually came from Arkansas and Oklahoma, often did not find a job in California or they had to work for low wages. Those one, who did not find a job, continued to wander from town to town. Nonetheless, by the end of 1930s, thanks to the newcomers, California's population rose by over a million.

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<sup>32</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 529.

<sup>33</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See Nash, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 724.

<sup>35</sup> See Allison Lassieur, *The Dust Bowl: An Interactive History Adventure* (Mankato: Capstone Press, 2009), 103.

<sup>36</sup> See Berkin, *Making America: A History of the United States*, 535.



## 1.6 Culture of the Great Depression

In the 1930s, the United States went through a cultural revolution.<sup>37</sup> When the World War I was over, authors and intellectuals turned their back on the society. Writers felt alienated in materialistic world of the Roaring Twenties. But when the Depression burst out, their despair did not deepen, the other way around, they found new determination as the consumer society decayed.

Writers expressed social issues in their works. Works of John Steinbeck deal with the misery of workers during the Great Depression. Also, during this decade, literature in the South experienced its renaissance. So called 'Southern Renaissance' includes significant writers, such as William Faulkner, Allen Tate and Tennessee Williams, as well as journalists like W. J. Cash or James Agee.<sup>38</sup>

The Depression boosted the development of popular culture. Number of radios sold grew steadily and it became a mass medium.<sup>39</sup> Before the crisis, about 10 million households had a radio, and at the end of the 1930s, this number increased to 27.5 million. Almost everybody in the States, even in remote rural areas, listened to latest news, as well as soap operas and comedies and other entertainment programs.<sup>40</sup>

Americans also went to cinema more often, even when its attendance decreased considerably at the beginning of the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of this era, almost 90 million people had gone to see a film every week. Cinema played an important part in the lives of these people, because they wanted to escape from the hard times of the Depression and to enjoy themselves for a while. Except for them, there were many serious films that dealt with the issues of the crisis, for example *Our Daily Bread* from 1932 and *The Public Enemy* from 1931. Thanks to Great Depression, American cinema was in its golden age.

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<sup>37</sup> See Tindall, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických*, 540.

<sup>38</sup> See Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>39</sup> See Justin Quinn, *Lectures on American Literature* (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 214.

<sup>40</sup> See Nash, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 735.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*

## 2 JOHN STEINBECK IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

John Steinbeck, the author of *Of Mice and Men*, was born on February 27, 1902, in California's Salinas. He was the third of four children, the only son of his parents. Steinbeck's mother, teacher Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was of an Irish origin. His father, also named John, was an accountant.<sup>42</sup>

It was his mother Olive, who excited Steinbeck's interest in storytelling. When he was fourteen, he told his parents that he wanted to become a writer, and at the age of 16, he sent some of his stories to magazines. He did well at school, and that is why he continued his studies at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, in 1919. Steinbeck decided to take only those courses, which were pertinent to his dream job, so he enrolled in literature and writing courses.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Steinbeck did not receive a university degree. In the 1920s, he left the university and came back several times. Meanwhile, he worked in the fields and roved the valleys in California, where the working men narrated their stories. These men often worked on ranches owned by company Spreckels Sugar, which sent workers from ranch to ranch in order to help harvest crops.<sup>44</sup> In 1925, he eventually left Stanford.

During the following five years, Steinbeck went through several jobs. At Lake Tahoe, he worked as a maintenance worker and a mail truck driver, and then he moved to New York City. In New York, he was a day labourer on the constructions of Madison Square Garden. Later, with help of his uncle Joe Hamilton, who was an advertising executive in Chicago, Steinbeck was employed by the *New York American* as a cub reporter but he was dismissed not long afterward. Subsequently, Steinbeck returned to California, where he held the post of a year-round caretaker for a summer estate in Lake Tahoe, where he completed his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), and where he met his future wife, Carol Henning.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Catherine Reef, *John Steinbeck* (New York: Clarion Books, 1996), 9.

<sup>43</sup> See Jeffrey D. Schultz and Luchen Li, *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts On File, 2005), 4.

<sup>44</sup> See John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), xii-xiii.

<sup>45</sup> See Schultz and Li, *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, 5.

In September 1928, Steinbeck lived for a short time in San Francisco, where he worked as a warehouseman at the Bemis Bag Company. However, this job was too strenuous for him, so with a financial support of his father, he moved to a summer residence in Pacific Grove in California, where he could concentrate his effort on writing. In August 1929, he published *Cup of Gold*, which was sold quite well.<sup>46</sup>

The 1930s were a turning point for Steinbeck. He could marry Carol, in the view of the fact he had a position of a published writer, and he released two other Californian fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* in 1932 and *To a God Unknown* in 1933. These books were critically praised, but they were not successful among readers. Also, he wrote a few short stories, such as “The Red Pony”, “The Murder” and “The White Quail”, which were published in the *North American Review*.<sup>47</sup>

During this time, Steinbeck and his wife moved to Salinas to care for his ill mother.<sup>48</sup> She died in 1934 and his father John died in the next year, shortly before Steinbeck achieved his first commercial success with *Tortilla Flat*. This series of humorous stories about Monterey’s paisanos ensured Steinbeck financial security and he became widely known.

This decade was most creative for Steinbeck as an author. He focused on economic and social issues of rural labourers during the Great Depression. At the late 1930s, he published three novels about Californian labouring class that became his most significant works: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The novella *Of Mice and Men* was his first huge popular success, and it is also the least political of his ‘labour trilogy’, while the Pulitzer Prize-awarded novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, a story about the Dust Bowl migrants, is considered by many his best.<sup>49</sup>

In 1943, shortly after divorcing Carol, Steinbeck married Gwyn Conger, and he was employed by the *New York Herald Tribune* to report on the World War II. He spent some time in England, North Africa and Italy.<sup>50</sup> After the end of the war, in 1945, he released

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<sup>46</sup> See Schultz and Li, *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See Morris Dickstein, “Steinbeck and the Great Depression,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 113.

<sup>50</sup> See “John Steinbeck Biography,” National Steinbeck Center, Accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.steinbeck.org/pages/john-steinbeck-biography>.

*Cannery Row*, a novel, also dealing with the lives of people during the Great Depression. In 1952, Steinbeck published *East of Eden*, a saga based on his own family's history set mainly in the Salinas Valley.<sup>51</sup>

Steinbeck wrote more than thirty books during his life, and in 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his “realistic and imaginative writing, combining as it does sympathetic humor and social perception”<sup>52</sup>, as Anders Osterling, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, said in his presentation speech.

John Steinbeck spent the last decade of his life in New York with his third wife, Elaine Scott, with whom he travelled a lot. In the 1960s, his health declined. Yet, in 1967, he went to Vietnam to cover the war for *Newsday Magazine*. John Steinbeck died of heart disease on December 20, 1968.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See “John Steinbeck Biography,” National Steinbeck Center, Accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.steinbeck.org/pages/john-steinbeck-biography>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See Ibid.

### 3 OF MICE AND MEN

*Of Mice and Men* was Steinbeck's first work, which achieved commercial success. This novella was published on February 25, 1937, by Covici-Friede, and priced at two dollars a copy. As a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, it sold briskly – about 117 thousand copies were sold before it was published, averagely one thousand copies per day in the first month.<sup>54</sup>

*Of Mice and Men* consists of six chapters. Each chapter begins with a description of the present setting. The whole story is written in dialogue-action form that resembles a stage drama. It means that most of the text consists of dialogues that lead to an action performed by the characters. Steinbeck himself called said that he wrote “a kind of playable novel”<sup>55</sup> and then he added that it is “written in novel form but so scened and set that it can be played as it stands.”<sup>56</sup>

At the end of 1937, Steinbeck adapted the novella for the Broadway stage and it opened at the Music Box Theatre in New York on November 23, 1937. The play was also a huge success among people and it won New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1937.<sup>57</sup>

The story is set in Salinas Valley in California at the time of the Great Depression. It tells a story of two wage labourers, friends George Milton and Lennie Small, who travel around ranches in order to find a job. They are very different – Lennie is simple-minded, strong, hardworking and needs to be looked after by smaller George; but they share one dream: that one day, they will have some land and farm of their own, where they will breed rabbits and other animals.

Eventually, they find work on a ranch in Salinas Valley. They are determined to remain there as long as possible so that they earn enough money to make their dream come true. Nonetheless, Lennie often got into trouble on previous ranches because of mental retardation. Soon after arriving, he has a fight with impulsive Curley, the son of the boss of the ranch, who attacks Lennie. He defends himself and crushes Curley's hand.

Also, Lennie likes to pet soft things, such as furs of small animals. When he discovers that Slim, another worker on the ranch, has puppies, he asks Slim whether he can have one.

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<sup>54</sup> See Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, xxii.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> See Tetsumaro Hayashi, *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 117.

Lennie gets the puppy, he is happy and plays with it in the barn; however, he does not estimate his strength and kills it by accident. After that coquettish Curley's wife enters the barn and starts talking to Lennie about her failed life, and she offers him to pet her hair. Lennie likes her soft hair, but he uses too much strength, Curley's wife begins screaming, and frightened Lennie accidentally breaks her neck.

Lennie guesses that he has done something wrong and runs away. When Curley's wife dead body is found, men from the ranch begin to search for Lennie, demanding his lynching. George knows where Lennie is hidden, finds him and shoots him himself to save him from cruel treatment.

### 3.1 Meaning of the Title

The original title of this story was *Something That Happened*. The story is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, who does not take sides, who does not explain or judge, and simply reports on something that happened on the ranch.<sup>58</sup> That is why the story is written in the past tense, it emphasises the last events. Steinbeck intended to make the reader draw their own conclusions.

Nevertheless, Steinbeck eventually chose a different title. *Of Mice and Men* is taken from a line in the penultimate stanza of Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse". This poem from 1795 is about an unhappy field mouse, which builds a winter nest, but it loses it because of ploughing, so the mouse cannot survive the winter.

A parallel between these two pieces of work can be found. The mouse from the poem dreamt of a safe and warm place in the winter, but for a ploughman's sake it has to struggle with cold, solitude and the idea of forthcoming death. The fate of this mouse is strikingly similar to the Lennie and George's. They also dream about their own place, a farm with rabbits in this case, but this dream is destroyed when George shoots Lennie at the end. The themes of dreams and solitude are included in both works and they are interconnected, because someone, who is lonely, needs a dream to cope with harsh reality.

According to William Goldhurst, the title has another application. He suggests that it "refers to naturalistic details with the texture of the novella."<sup>59</sup> It basically means that

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<sup>58</sup> See Stephen K. George, *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 64.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson J. Benson, *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck: Critical Essays with a Checklist to Steinbeck Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 60.

the title signifies that Lennie likes to catch mice and pet their soft fur. Nonetheless, he does not realize that he uses too much strength and usually kills the mice. Lennie's soft spot for stroking things he likes, such as small animals, red dresses etc. indicates his fatal incident with Curley's wife.

### 3.2 Setting

California's setting; Salinas Valley in particular, had a huge influence on Steinbeck's writing. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was a prosperous fertile agricultural area, often called the 'Salad Bowl of the Nation'.<sup>60</sup> Salinas is located near the Pacific Coast, and both the valley and the coast were inspiration for settings of some of Steinbeck's best books.

The setting of the novella plays a crucial role in the story. *Of Mice and Men* is set in the 1930s, at the time of Great Depression. The exact time is not specified. On the other hand; the time, when the story starts and ends, is accurately described. The story takes three days in sequence; it starts on Thursday evening, when George and Lennie stop by the Salinas River to bed down there, and it ends on Sunday evening, when George shoots Lennie at the same place.

California's Salinas Valley is the setting of the whole story. George and Lennie are migrant workers who drift about ranches and pick some fieldwork, and then they go on to another place. The story starts, when they arrive to a ranch near the city of Soledad. Soledad is situated in Monterey County in California and its name means "solitude" or "lonely place" in Spanish, which should suggest an idea of loneliness of migrant workers at that time. Soledad lies in the middle of prosperous agricultural area of Salinas Valley, and it is often referred to as the 'Salad Bowl of the Nation'.<sup>61</sup>

Before Lennie and George's arrival to the Salinas Valley, they worked in Weed, which is a city also located in California, specifically in the north of Soledad. They got into trouble there, because Lennie saw a girl in a red dress and he wanted to touch it, which scared the girl and she started to scream as Lennie would not stop holding the dress. Later

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<sup>60</sup> See "John Steinbeck Biography," National Steinbeck Center, Accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.steinbeck.org/pages/john-steinbeck-biography>.

<sup>61</sup> See Ibid.

she told the sheriff that she had been raped, so Lennie and George hid in an irrigation ditch and then ran away from Weed.

After Weed, they headed south. They had to find a new job, so they went to Murray and Ready's in San Francisco. Murray and Ready's was an employment agency. During the Great Depression, a lot of states started to licence and regulate employment agencies. Many workers at that time, like George and Lennie, searched for work there. In the first chapter, George tells Lennie: "You remember about us goin' into Murray and Ready's, and they give us work cards and bus tickets?"<sup>62</sup> These agencies, similar to Murray and Ready in San Francisco, sent workers from ranch to ranch, specifically to those ranches owned by Spreckels Sugar.

### 3.3 Friendship vs. Loneliness

This chapter is going to analyse the themes of friendship and loneliness in the novella. Friendship is represented by Lennie and George, while loneliness was common for most of migratory workers at the time of the Great Depression.

There are only a few characters in *Of Mice and Men*. Most of them are migrant farmers who drift about villages and ranches of Salinas Valley, they work on fields for a short time and then they go on to another place, where they find a job. Steinbeck focused his writing on these workers, and he portrayed them as social victims and object of pity created by the Depression.<sup>63</sup>

The main protagonists of this novella, Lennie Small and George Milton, are like other migratory workers. Nevertheless, they always travel together, which was unusual for that time. This can be seen in the dialogue between George and Slim, the lead mule-team driver at the ranch, after George and Lennie arrive. "Funny how you an' him string along together,"<sup>64</sup> says Slim to George, who does not understand why and Slim explains: "Oh, I dunno. Hardly none of the guys ever travel together. [...] You know how the hands are, they just come in and get their bunk and work a month, and then they quit and go alone."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> See Dickstein, "Steinbeck and the Great Depression," 122.

<sup>64</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



As it was already mentioned, migratory workers were usually isolated in the society. They had no home, or no property of their own, so they wandered around ranches and they were dependent on the mercy of the farm owner's, as well as on the weather. If the weather was not good for agriculture, there were no jobs for these people and in some cases; they could be even homeless until the conditions did not improve. That is why it seems so strange to Slim to see Lennie and George travel together. Under given circumstances, it was almost impossible to develop lasting friendship in such a transient way of life.

The reason why George and Lennie stay together is their shared past. Both Lennie and George were born in the same town, in Auburn in California. At first, George made fun of Lennie, because of his lower intelligence, which George explains to Slim: "Funny. I used to have a hell of a lot of fun with 'im. Used to play jokes on 'im 'cause he was too dumb to take care of 'imself."<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, they became friends and when Lennie's aunt Clara, who took care of him, died, Lennie stayed with George, as he continues his narration to Slim: "When his Aunt Clara died, Lennie just come along with me out workin'. Got kinda used to each other after a little while."<sup>67</sup>

This unusual friendship became beneficial for Lennie and George. They help one another. George is the smarter one; he cares for Lennie and he tries to prevent him from getting into trouble again, while mentally-retarded Lennie is naive, but extremely strong, so he can work hard and carry heavy things on the fields.

Thanks to each other, Lennie and George are not lonely. This companionship helps them to deal with their hard situation. Unlike others migrant workers, they do not give up even when everything feels hopeless and they still believe in better days. In the first chapter, a night before they come to the ranch, Lennie and George talk together: "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place,"<sup>68</sup> says George to Lennie and Lennie continues, "*But not us! An' why? Because...because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why.*"<sup>69</sup> They realize that their friendship is extraordinary and makes them stronger.

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<sup>66</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

In fact, George is not only a friend of Lennie's, he is his protector. Lennie's personality is childlike. He is totally depended on George, whom he obeys and does everything what George says to him. In addition, Lennie is forgetful, and George always needs to remind him about essential issues.

Lennie is gentle and kind, he does not want to hurt anyone or anything. Nonetheless, he does not realize his strength and also he does not understand abstract concepts, such as death. Lennie is a flat character and he does not change throughout the story. At the end, even though he guesses that he did something wrong (the murder of Curley's wife); he is not fully unaware of consequences of his actions. Lennie's only worry consists in the fact that George will not allow him to take care of the rabbits on their dream farm.

George, the opposite of Lennie, a small and clever man, is more dynamic character. Although he often complains that he has to look after Lennie, and that he would have a better life without him, because Lennie "gives him hell"<sup>70</sup>, he does not mean it seriously. He knows that his life would be lonely and empty without Lennie. As it was mentioned before, George made fun of Lennie at first, but he changed his feelings about him later on. He is more realistic and pragmatic about owning their farm, but with Lennie's company, he admits it is possible.

According to William Goldhurst, loneliness might be seen as the alternative to the companionship of Lennie and George.<sup>71</sup> It was ever-present in the then society. The camaraderie of Lennie and George is unique and more noticeable in contrast to the lonely world created by the Depression.

Nevertheless, the cruel world of the Great Depression did not allow this friendship to remain. George's decision to shoot Lennie was an act of mercy, but with fatal consequences for him. When George sees a dead body of Curley's wife, he knows that Lennie did it and where he is hiding, so he heads for the place. George shoots Lennie in the back of his head with a heavy heart, but he decided it was better than lynching. However, as Cian O'Driscoll claims, by killing Lennie, George also destroys himself.<sup>72</sup> By killing

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<sup>70</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 102.

<sup>71</sup> See Benson, *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck: Critical Essays with a Checklist to Steinbeck Criticism*, 52.

<sup>72</sup> See Cian O'Driscoll, "Why Don't You Tell Us About Them Rabbits, George? The Tragedy of Just War," *International Studies Review* 15 (2013): 234.

Lennie, he condemns himself to a cruel life of lonely migrant workers, and possibly to a life of hard labour and liquor.

Workers from the novella often go to the town to drink some alcohol, which help them to forget about their harsh lives, at least for a while. However, they spend all money they earn there, thereby they deprive themselves of the chance to save money and arrange their lives. At the beginning of the story, George explains to Lennie that they are not like those workers: “We don’t have to sit in no bar room blowin’ in our jack jus’ because we got no place else to go.”<sup>73</sup> But when George kills Lennie at the end of the novella, Slims gets to George and suggests: “Come on, George. Me an’ you’ll go in an’ get a drink,”<sup>74</sup> to which George agrees. George will probably continue his life like many other migrant workers, lonely and spending all money on alcohol.

A question whether George had to kill Lennie suggests itself. It can be argued that George and Lennie could flee and continue their lives as before, trying to save up enough money to buy a small farm. Nonetheless, George knows that even if they managed to escape, another incident could probably happen. Lennie would never understand that he committed something that he should not have done. George realizes that he is no longer able to protect Lennie from the society; as well he cannot protect the society from Lennie. Also, it can be interpreted that shooting Lennie was an unselfish act, because without Lennie, George has nothing left. His choice is to save Lennie from lynching, and the society from his unpredictable behaviour, thereby he ruins his own life.

Another type of companionship is represented by Candy and his dog. Candy is the oldest ranch worker who has lost his right hand at work by accident. He is a ‘swamper’ at the ranch, because his only duty is to clean the bunk house. He has a very old dog, which is his only friend. There might be a parallel between the relationship of Candy and his dog and Lennie and George. Lennie and the dog are both the ‘dependent’ on their friends, who take care of them, and they are also loyal to them. Their friendships are strong.

Other workers want to get rid of Candy’s dog, because it is smelly and old. They make excuses that they want to free the dog from its misery. Nevertheless, Candy is not able to shoot it, so Carlson, another worker on the ranch, does it instead of Candy. After that,

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<sup>73</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Candy tells George that he should have shot his dog himself, which George remembers. Later, when Lennie kills Curley's wife, George knows that he is responsible for Lennie, so it must be him who shoots him and so protects him from subsequent suffering. Both Lennie and George's and Candy and his dog's companionship did not last and ended tragically. No matter how strong these companionships were, the cruel life of the then society defeated them.

People from minorities were isolated and lonely more than the others, because even if they wanted a company, it was not possible to have it. In the novella, this type of loneliness is represented by the only Afro-American worker, Crooks, and by the only woman at the ranch, Curley's wife.

The Great Depression worsened the situation of the Afro-Americans and it also strengthened racism against them. When the crisis began, they were the first group of people to be dismissed from their jobs, and comparing to white workers, their unemployment rate was two to three times higher.<sup>75</sup> Unemployment rate was also very high among white people and they did not want African-Americans to take 'their' jobs.

Crooks is the stable hand at the ranch. He is the only black man and the only permanent worker there, because he has injured his back in an accident. His loneliness is caused by his colour, as racism was still common in the Depression-era America. Crooks has his own bunk in the harness, because he cannot enter the bunk house and be in touch with other workers. No one goes into his bunk, and he is always called the 'nigger'.

Crooks keeps his room swept and neat, and he owns a lot of books, including a mauled copy of the California Civil Code for 1905. He is proud of himself, and he is possibly educated, because he reads all the books. At the beginning, it seems that he is an aloof man, who is not interested in any company, but it turns out not to be true, when Lennie unexpectedly walks into his room. First, Crooks wants him to leave: "I ain't wanted in the bunk house, and you ain't wanted in my room."<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, simple-minded Lennie does not understand why he is not wanted, to which Crooks replays: "Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you,

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<sup>75</sup> See John Hardman, "The Great Depression and the New Deal," Stanford University, Accessed April 1, 2016, [https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty\\_prejudice/soc\\_sec/hgreat.htm](https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/soc_sec/hgreat.htm).

<sup>76</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 68.

you all of you stink to me.”<sup>77</sup> From that speech, it is obvious that Crooks longs for company, and he only takes an embittered stance so that he does not show his true feelings and prevent himself from being hurt.

On the other hand, Curley’s wife is the only representative of female gender at the ranch. Agricultural work was assigned for men and women were supposed to take care of the household, so if they live on ranches or farms, they usually stayed inside. When Lennie and George arrive to the ranch, Curley’s wife is newly married to Curley, the son of the boss. Curley’s wife wanders around the ranch trying to make anyone talk to her. Her name is unknown, the narrator and the other members of the ranch only refer to her as ‘Curley’s wife’. This fact suggest an idea that she is not worth a proper name, she is only ‘a property’ of her husband and even that she does not have any identity.

At the beginning of the story, only some superficial pieces of information are known about her. Curley’s wife is a pretty woman, she likes to wear nice clothes and she curls her hair and uses much make-up. As she wanders around the ranch, and also around the bunk house, she seems to be very coquettish. She always looks for Curley, which is under pretence of getting into the bunk house and trying to find someone to start a conversation with. Other men of the ranch try to avoid her, because they do not want to become embroiled in a conflict with jealous Curly.

However, in the course of the story, more personal information about her comes out. Being the only woman at the ranch, Curley’s wife feels lonely. She is desperate for some human contact, that is why she is always outside and ‘looking for Curley’. Curley’s wife even comes by at Crooks’s, when Lennie and Candy are there, while other men left the ranch for a town. When she enters the rooms asking whether they have seen Curley, Candy says sourly that they have not, and Curley’s wife continues: “Funny thing. If I catch any one man, and he’s alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an’ you won’t talk. Jus’ nothing but mad.”<sup>78</sup> From what she says, it is evident how much she wants to talk to someone, and other men want to avoid her, because the work at the ranch is everything what they have, and if they made Curley angry, they know he could dismiss them.

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<sup>77</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 68.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Curley's wife in actual fact does not like her husband. She reveals her secret to Lennie in the barn, a while before Lennie kills her by accident. "Well, I ain't told this to nobody before,"<sup>79</sup> Curley's wife confides in Lennie, "Maybe I ought'n to. I don't like Curly. He ain't a nice fella."<sup>80</sup> The reason why she married Curley was that did not have bright prospects for better life.

Curley's wife wanted to become an actress. When she was a young girl, there was a touring theatre in Salinas, a town where she lived at that time. One of the actors told her that she could go with them, but her mother did not allow it, because she was only fifteen. Later, she met another man from film industry, who promised her that he would help her to start a career in Hollywood. Nevertheless, he never got back to her again, so Curley's wife eventually married Curley.

To sum up, this chapter proves that the Depression created lonely people, which John Steinbeck indicated by the characters of the novella. Even if there was some kind of friendship or companionship, such as Lennie and George's, it did not last for a long time. The coincidence of the Depression-era America did not look with favour on friendship among migrant workers. Minorities, such as the blacks were also lonely. In the 1930s, the racism against African-Americans strengthened. The unemployment rate was high and most employers preferred to employ a white man. Crooks, the worker on the ranch and the only black man, is lonely because of racial prejudice that the Great Depression only extended. Lastly, Curley's wife represents solitude of women. At the time, there were not usually many women on ranches. The jobs on ranches were assigned for men and the role of woman was a housewife. Moreover, Curley's wife's position of a wife of the jealous and high-ranked Curley made her lonely.

### 3.4 Dream vs. Reality

Dreams have a crucial role in the story. Every character dreams their own dream, but the dreams have something in common: everyone wants to release themselves from a cruel life caused by the Depression. Basically, they dream of a better life. These dreams are the same as the dreams of most American people at that time. Characters of the story represent the nation's dreams and also frustrations.

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<sup>79</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 87.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

The major dream of the novella belongs to George and Lennie, who dream about a small farm of their own. Their dream is known from the first chapter, when the two of them rest by the Salinas River, and George narrates: “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—”<sup>81</sup>, which Lennie interrupts and shouts: “An’ live off the fatta the lan’. An’ have *rabbits*.”<sup>82</sup>

At the beginning, their dream seems remote. They do not have enough money, because they are not able to save them, because of Lennie’s ability to get into trouble and also low wages, as George complains to Slim: “An’ I ain’t so bright neither, or I wouldn’t be buckin’ barley for my fifty and found.”<sup>83</sup> George is more realistic than Lennie; he realizes that it is not easy to save a sufficient amount of money. Under given circumstances, their dream seems to be nearly impossible.

However, the dream has another function. George knows that the dream is hard to accomplish, but he uses it for a different purpose. It can influence Lennie’s behaviour. George uses the story about a small farm with rabbits to bring Lennie into line. Whenever Lennie gets into trouble, George threatens him that he will not take care of his rabbits. In addition, George often narrates about the farm before Lennie goes to sleep; it is something like a bedtime story. The narration of the dream emphasises their role: simple-minded Lennie is the child, while realistic George resembles a father. Lennie wants to hear the same story over and over again, even when he has already memorized it, and corrects George anytime he forgets about any detail. Even though George is not Lennie’s father, his attitude to Lennie is definitely parental, and the dream is an educational means.

As the story progresses, Lennie and George’s unfavourable situation starts to change as they meet Candy. Candy realizes that one day, when he will no longer be able to do his work; he will have to leave the ranch. So when he hears about George and Lennie’s dream, he wants to join them. Initially, George is sceptical, but when Candy offers his life savings, including the money he got as a compensation for his lost hand, he agrees.

With Candy’s money, their dream is within reach. Candy gives his 350 dollars, so Lennie and George only need to work for a month to earn one hundred dollars to the down

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<sup>81</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

payment. Now, even realistic George starts to believe that the dream may come true. Nevertheless, their dream ends with Curley's wife and Lennie's death, even though Candy left some hope. Candy wants to achieve the dream only with George and pleads with him, but it is not possible. Candy tries even when he subconsciously knows it was over at the moment he found a dead body of Curley's wife – he is furious, because a chance of a better life is gone.

Candy represents the fear of reality of what will happen to ageing people who are not able to work. The fear was present in the then American society. At that time, people out of job were usually people out of home, suffering from lack of food. Candy does not want to be one of those people, and when the opportunity of having a farm presents itself, he forms a strong attachment to it. When the dream is over, Candy's harsh reality is back.

As it was already mentioned, Curley's wife dreamt of being a movie star, nevertheless she reconciles herself to unhappy marriage. Even bitter Crooks feels a desire, for a moment, for a patch of garden on Lennie and George's small farm. Nevertheless, none of the characters can ever achieve their dream.

### 3.4.1 American Dream

The dreams, which the character of *Of Mice and Men* have, contain typical features of the American Dream. The term 'American Dream' was used for the first time in 1931, at the time of Great Depression, specifically in the book called *The Epic of America* by James Thruslow Adams, an American historian.<sup>84</sup> The idea of the American dream is that everyone, no matter what class they were born into, can achieve a success in a society if they work hard.

Lennie and George believe that if they try hard, they can achieve their goal, to have a small farm on their own. Indeed, many people consider an ownership of a property as fulfilment of the American Dream. However, Lennie and George never get a place of their own, as well many people in the Depression-era America. As Lennie dies, the American Dream of owning a farm dies with him. The book proves that it was impossible to achieve the American Dream during the Great Depression, regardless of intensive effort, as it is apparent from Crooks's speech to Lennie and Candy: "You're

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<sup>84</sup> See Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-4.



nuts. I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads,"<sup>85</sup> and continues with scorn, "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."<sup>86</sup>

Before the Great Depression, many people believed that American Dream was attainable. A lot of them moved to the United States, following the vision of better life if they work hard. The crisis changed the situation. Despite the fact that Lennie and George, as well as other workers on the ranch, work hard, they have nothing out of it. Their work is beneficial only for others. Steinbeck criticizes the American Dream in his novella. He demonstrates it on Lennie and George: even if people work hard, they did not necessarily have to attain their American Dream.

To sum up, none of the characters is able to fulfil their dreams. Lennie and George dream about their small farm, but when Lennie dies, the dream dies with him. Lennie and George's dream is similar to the ones of many American people at the time. In the 1930s, a lot of people still believed there was an opportunity to attain their American Dream. Nonetheless, the inauspicious fate of Lennie and George, as well as of other characters' of the novella, articulated that during the hard times of the Great Depression, it was not possible for common people to achieve their dreams.

### 3.5 Power vs. Poverty

During the Depression, economic exploitation happened on ranches in the United States. At the ranch in the novella, the situation is rather the same. There is a great amount of agricultural wealth, and to make this wealth, farms need workers. Nonetheless, workers were paid low wages and they were often close to starvation.

In the 1930s, people who owned a property and were able to keep it, could be considered as the wealthy ones. In the novella, a conflict between classes appear: poverty and the lower class is represented by Lennie, George and other workers, while power and higher class is portrayed at Curley and his wife. This conflict leads to a catastrophe.

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<sup>85</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 73.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Curley is a typical example of how ownership spoils people. He is the son of the boss of the ranch. Curley is a short, thin young man with a brown face, brown eyes and curly hair and he always wears high-heeled boots in order to become different from other workers at the ranch. As Candy explains to Lennie and George, when they arrive to the ranch, Candy likes fighting. He is short, so he hates big man and always tries to pick fights with them to prove his masculinity.

Curley is said to be an amateur boxer and a champion prize-fighter. Being agile, he usually wins the fight. Candy does not think it is fair that he fights bigger men, as he explains to George: "S'pose Curley jumps a big guy an' licks him. Ever'body says what a game guy Curley is. And s'pose he does the same thing and gets licked. Then ever'body says the big guy oughtta pick somebody his size [...] Seems like Curley ain't givin' nobody a chance."<sup>87</sup> Thanks to his high position, he dares to fight with bigger men and nobody has objections to that. Even when Curley loses the fight, he becomes the moral winner, because everyone feels pity for him, as the opponent should have picked someone equal. Every victory makes Curley more arrogant.

Another thing that makes Curley boastful and conceited is his wife. Curley married an attractive woman to prove himself. When the story begins, they have been married for two weeks. Steinbeck did not give Curley's wife a name in the story, which suggests the idea that she is only Curley's possession. And this fact is obvious in Curley's treatment of her. As he is extremely jealous, he tries to command her and wants her to stay inside the house. Nevertheless, he cannot control her, as she always slips away, which makes Curley angry. Also, he threatens the ranch workers with a fight if they dare to talk to her.

Even when Curley boasts about wearing a glove filled with Vaseline to keep his hand soft for his wife, by which he makes a big show, he frequently goes to brothels with other workers. This indicates that Curley is not really in love with his wife and the reason why he married her is that he only wanted to 'own' a physically attractive woman.

When Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife and Curley sees her dead body, he does not show any grief for her. He is furious like he would have lost a precious thing, not his own wife. The first thing that comes into his mind is that he has to find and kill her murderer. He immediately realizes it was Lennie, because at the time the incident

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<sup>87</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 28.

happened, all men but Lennie were out playing horseshoes. Curley does not call for justice; he calls for revenge, as he wants to lynch him. Yet Slim, the jerk-line skinner at the ranch, feels pity for Lennie, not for Curley, when the men set off find Lennie and Slim says: “Poor bastard.”<sup>88</sup>

Curley’s wife is a complex character. She is lonely and dissatisfied, as it was analysed in the previous chapter. Yet, being the wife of the boss’s son, she is a representative of economic power. Curley’s wife gained her position through her marriage and she is aware of her power, as it is showed in her dialogue with Crooks in his room. Crooks wants her to leave his room immediately, threatening that he will inform Curley that she was in his a ‘coloured man’s room’, whereupon Curley’s wife replies arrogantly: “Listen, Nigger. You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?”<sup>89</sup> After this, Crooks withdraws but Curley’s wife continues: “Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain’t even funny.”<sup>90</sup> In her speech, Curley’s wife reminds Crooks of his place and wants him to show her the proper respect as a white woman and the wife of Curley, the boss’s son. Curley’s wife knows that if she made up a lie about Crooks, everybody would trust her, not a black man, because she was a white woman of a high social status.

Curley’s wife uses one more type of power: power of seduction. She knows that she is an attractive woman and uses her beauty to gain some company. This type of power has a negative portrayal in the novella, as Curley’s wife is described as the ‘tart’, ‘bitch’, ‘tramp’ and ‘rat-trap’ by the men of the ranch. In general, the portrait of women in the story is not positive. Women are considered to be troublemakers or prostitutes, who only destroy male happiness and well-being by their seductive behaviour. This point of view proves a fact that men of the ranch go to ‘old Susy’s place’, which is a brothel. The women in there are treated like dirt and of no value, which evinces an idea that women are inferior to men.

Another type of power is represented by Slim. He is the authority and the natural leader at the ranch, respected even by Curley. Slim is very good at his job of a mule driver, and everybody asks Slim for advice. His high position is evident from the description given

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<sup>88</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 97.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

when he enters the bunk house for the first time: “[...] 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 [...] There was a gravity in his manner and a profound that all talk stopped when he spoke.”<sup>91</sup>

Slim is a representative of “good power” that naturally belongs to him. He is fair and he is admired on the ranch. Slim inspires confidence in other people and that is why he is the only person George confides to his and Lennie’s past. When there is a fight between Lennie and Curley and Lennie smashes Curley’s hand, Slim makes Curley lie about what happened, and tells him to say that he got his hand in a machine. Slim knows what Curley is like, he understands his nature more than anybody else, and so he uses it to help Lennie and George.

Knowing the truth about Lennie and his troubles caused by his lower intelligence, Slim understands the bond between George and Lennie and the reason why George oversees of Lennie all the time. After George shoots Lennie, Slim justifies his decision, because he knows it was an act of mercy, saying to George: “Never you mind. A guy got to sometimes.”<sup>92</sup> The description of Slim suggests an idea that even power can be gained by character traits to some extent.

The dreams of people at the ranch, as they were commented on in the previous chapter, are a means of escaping from an economic prison and the immorality of economic exploitation as represented in the power structure of the ranch.<sup>93</sup> Migrant workers suffered from poverty. Lennie and George are two of them, they drifted about ranches, they were dependent on seasonal jobs, and they worked for low wages, as with the number of workers increasing, the wages were lower and lower.

During the Depression, workers had to face a cruel world of poverty, which often reduced them to animals. Like animals, their only goal is to obtain some food and survive among their mates. In the novella, Steinbeck gives several descriptions of Lennie and George being animals that prove this statement. Before they arrive to the ranch, Lennie

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<sup>91</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>93</sup> See George, *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*, 64.

drinks thirsty from a green pool “[...] snorting in the water like a horse”<sup>94</sup> and in the description of his walking, there is “[...] and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws.”<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, George’s first description given in the text evokes an idea of a rodent: “The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features.”<sup>96</sup> Possibly, Steinbeck’s vision of poor people at that time was similar to animals, and he brought human and animal world closer together.

To sum up, power and poverty are closely related to the consequences of the Great Depression. Characters of the novella prove that there were great differences in the power structures on ranches. The Depression created poor people, who suffered from economic exploitation, as they were paid low wages. Also, these workers did not have a place of their own and they were dependent on seasonal jobs, so they often had to drift about ranches and villages hoping to pick some fieldwork and to be able to support themselves, as it was shown on Lennie and George. On the other hand, there is Curley and his wife, who do not have to work hard, because they are owners of a property, which gives them power, and they are also a good examples of how ownership spoils people and makes them arrogant.

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<sup>94</sup> Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this bachelor thesis was to analyse the themes connected with the Great Depression in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

The themes that were chosen for this analysis are loneliness, in contrast to friendship; dreams, in contrast to reality; and poverty, in contrast to power. To be able to analyse the Depression in Steinbeck's work, it was essential to comprehend its historical and social background that is why it is described in the first chapter of the thesis.

Loneliness was one of the consequences of the Depression. Characters of the novella indicate that the Depression created lonely people. Migrant workers drifted about ranches, they picked some fieldwork, and then they moved to another place. Under given circumstances, it was almost impossible to develop lasting friendship in this transient way of life. Even if there was some kind of friendship or companionship, such as Lennie and George's, the Depression-era America did not allow it to survive. Another type of loneliness was portrayed via minorities, represented by Crooks, a black man, and Curley's wife, the only female character in the novella. Crooks is lonely because of racial prejudice that were extended during the Great Depression, while what makes Curley's wife lonely is that she is the only woman on the ranch and also her high position of the wife of the son of the boss.

Subsequently, the thesis examined the impossibility to fulfil one's dream. In the 1930s, many Americans people still believed that they could attain their dream. Nevertheless, Steinbeck in his novella illustrated that it was not possible. Lennie and George dreamt about their farm, they worked hard for it, but they never achieved it, as well as other characters.

The last theme that the thesis analysed was contrast between power and poverty. Steinbeck pointed out great differences in the power structure on the ranch. The farmers suffered from economic exploitation, as they were paid low wages. These workers did not have a place of their own and they were dependent on seasonal jobs, as it was shown on Lennie and George. On the other hand, Curley and his wife did not have to work hard, because they were owners of a property, which gave them power, but it also spoiled them.

This thesis comes to the conclusion that John Steinbeck portrayed the Great Depression of the 1930s as a destructive power. It made people poor and lonely, and it did not allow them to fulfil their dreams. As a result, these people, like the characters of the novella, lost their morality and also identity.

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