

Research on the Conflict Between Typical Characters in Of Mice and Men from the Perspective of Realism

Xiaoyun Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹Vanke School Pudong, Shanghai, 201315, China,

a. XiaoyunZhang_2024@yeah.net

*corresponding author

Abstract: John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* is written in the context of the Great Depression and the prevailing American Dream. *Of Mice and Men* is not a typical work of realism, but the characteristics of realism can be seen throughout the novella. Therefore, this paper will be focused on the representations of realism in *Of Mice and Men*. There are three kinds of conflicts between characters that are presented in a realistic way and will be analyzed in this paper: the conflicts between different social classes (Curley and George&Lennie), genders (Curley's wife and the other workers), and races (Crooks and the whites). This paper will offer some background information on the Great Depression and the American Dream and, most importantly, address those conflicts between characters through realism, which emphasizes the true representation of the real world and real problems in society through the portrayal of realistic characters and plots.

Keywords: realism, *Of Mice and Men*, the Great Depression, the American Dream

1. Introduction

Of Mice and Men, a novella written by John Steinbeck, perfectly reflects the era of The Great Depression in America during the 13th to 14th century. There are numerous theses about *Of Mice and Men* analyzing its metaphors, characters, or themes, but there's a lack of works that links the novella to the concept of realism, which is an ideology that has a great impact on modern art, philosophy, and literature. Realism in literature emphasizes the truthfulness of a story that focuses on everyday lives and people in ordinary times and places without portraying or presenting dramatical or nonsensical characters and plots [1]. The interesting point is that the novella is neither a typical representation of realism nor of modernism, but can be understood as a mixture of both. However, this essay will only focus on the realism aspect through the triple conflicts between the typical characters. First, the opposition between Lennie and George with Curley reflects the two-way intolerance of the working class and the capitalist class. Second, the subtle relationship between Curley's wife and the other boys on the ranch, as well as Curley's attitude toward his wife, shows the white war between the two genders. Lastly, the character of Crooks, a black worker, reveals the ineffaceable inequality and conflict between the black and white. All those collisions among the characters are true problems in society and are represented through daily lives, and even its tragic ending seems so reasonable and destined, which makes the work an ideal example for realism analysis.

2. A Brief Background

2.1. Of Mice and Men

The novella *Of Mice and Men* was published in 1937, written by John Steinbeck. It tells the story of a migrant farm worker, Lennie, and his dimwitted giant friend, George, perusing their dream of owning a piece of land together during the Great Depression. However, their path to realizing this dream wasn't smooth at all. George and Lennie encountered hostility and calamity nearly everywhere they went [2]. Lennie's inability to act as a normal person, both mentally and physically, was almost always the cause of their struggles. As a result, Lennie was the burden both to George and to their dreamlike future, which was the truth George refused to confront. The dream of owning their own little land was unrealistic by any standards. The American Dream is an important theme and key background in this novella, it is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American dream is believed to be achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance [3]. George and Lennie's dream of working hard and saving enough money to purchase their own farmland symbolizes the concrete ways in which the American dream serves as an idealized goal for poor and working-class Americans even in the darkest times. *Of Mice and Men* is based on the time of the Great Depression, which represented the end of the era of the American Dream when the artistic and economic innovation and prosperity of the "Roaring Twenties" came to a decisive stop and American society went into crisis mode [4].

2.2. Realism

Realism is a literary phenomenon that emerged after the bourgeoisie established its dominant position. After the 1830s, the trend of the Romantic movement had dried up in Europe and realism had taken its place. Realism is not a unified and universal movement, but the 19th century is considered the century of great realism. Stendhal and Balzac of France are recognized as outstanding representatives of realism [5]. Paying attention to reality, facing reality, being loyal to reality, and describing life as it is, are the basic characteristics of Literary realism. The materials of the novel are drawn from reality, and the characters, events, etc. in the work are all real and concrete reflections of society. The reality reflected in the novel exists in real life, and the content to be expressed in the work is also based on reality, and through the revelation of various complex relationships such as real characters and real life, it showcases all aspects of social life, reflecting the characteristic of "representation", which refers to the truthful portrayal of objective reality, which requires literature to be based on objective reality, face reality, and be faithful to real life, rather than avoiding it [6].

3. Conflicts in Of Mice and Men

John Steinbeck addresses social problems and phenomena through the portrayal of real and typical characters and the conflict between them, through which the features of realism are fulfilled. The conflicts will be interpreted in three aspects, which are the conflicts between social classes, genders, and races.

3.1. The Conflict Between the Working Class and the Capitalist Class

The conflict between the working class and the capitalist class is shown through different characters. The story is set in America during the Great Depression, a time of economic difficulty and inequality. The capitalist class wields great power and control over the working class. Characters like Carly, the farm owner's son, abuse their authority and use their social status to abuse and intimidate workers.

This power imbalance creates a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability in the working class, reflecting an unequal distribution of power and resources. Economic inequality between the working class and the capitalist class has been evident throughout history. Workers struggle for a living and dream of owning their own land, while the capitalist class enjoys wealth and privilege. This disparity creates a sense of helplessness and dissatisfaction among working-class people, and highlights the chasm between the two classes.

George and Lennie are typical working-class people, seeking jobs and opportunities, and can only earn money with their own hands and their dreams can only be realized through hard work. On the other hand, the ranch owner's son, Curley, was born with properties. He doesn't need to consider living and looks down on the other ranch workers. The significant difference in their social status is the essence of their conflict. In addition to the difference in status, the reason for the conflict between the two workers and Curley is Lennie's huge size; as the swamper said, "He hates big guys. He's all the time picking scraps with big guys." [7], just because Curley himself is a little guy. Because Lennie is tall and strong and often refuses to answer Curley's questions, which is considered to be disrespectful, Curley is always hostile to him. The conflict reached its peak when Curley hits Lennie and Lennie breaks Curley's fist. Curley thought Lennie was laughing at him and couldn't hide his detest toward Lennie anymore and hit him in the face. At first, Lennie was afraid and didn't know what to do, but when George encouraged him to get Curley, which also shows George's hatred toward Curley, Lennie grabbed Curley's hand and crushed it. Lennie is presented as a dangerous person at this moment; this is shown in the quote, "He stood crying, his fist lost in Lennie's paw." [7] When Lennie strikes back and crushes Curley's hand, the blow is so powerful that Curley, a grown up man, is literally crying. This indicates the harm that Lennie can cause. The writer also uses metaphor to describe Lennie's fist as a "paw", which further suggests that Lennie is as strong and dangerous as a wild animal. Overall, *Of Mice and Men* portrays the conflict between the working class and the capitalist class by highlighting the prime cause of opposition between the two classes and their direct physical combat. Through their struggles and dreams, Steinbeck sheds light on the systemic issues that arise from this conflict.

3.2. The Conflict Between Genders

The story is set during the Great Depression, a time when traditional gender roles were prevalent. Male characters like George and Lenny are expected to work and support themselves, while female characters like Curley's wife are often restricted to domestic roles. This division reinforces societal expectations and restrictions imposed on individuals based on their gender. Curley's wife is the story's sole prominent female character. She is objectified and never given a name, instead being referred to as "Curley's wife" throughout. This lack of identity reflects how women were frequently ignored and regarded as possessions rather than persons with desires and objectives of their own.

As probably the only woman on the ranch, and under the control of her autocratic husband, Curley's wife faces immense loneliness. She tried to relieve the loneliness by trying to approach the farm workers in a flirting way, as the others said, "Well, she got the eye." [7] However, the others always refuse to talk to her or even stay with her, it isn't because she is annoying or they dislike her, instead, it's because the workers are afraid of her husband, Curley. Curley would be mad if he saw his wife messing around with the other boys, this is shown in the line, "I get lonely," she said. "You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad." [7] In order to keep themselves out of trouble, the workers would avoid her all the time, but Curley's wife said "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", which shows that they are just pretending to be indifferent and not interested in women [7]. This invisible oppression she endures from Curley pushes her toward Lennie, who doesn't know why he should be far away from her and, incidentally, killed her. Curley's

wife was a girl with dreams too; she once met a producer who offered her the dream of becoming an actress. She told the story of her past to Lennie, the only person who was willing to listen to her: “He says he was gonna put me in the movies. Says I was a natural. Soon’s he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it.” “Coulda been in the movies, an’ had nice clothes-all them nice clothes like they wear. An’ I coulda sat in them big hotels, an’ had pitchers took of me.” [7]. However, this was a dream that would never come true, and she married Curley, which was the start of her tragic life. She is desperate to speak to people and express her feelings, but due to the restriction placed on her gender, that is, women should only stay in the house and shouldn’t get in touch with other men apart from her husband, she is very isolated, and Lennie is the only person who would share dreams and thoughts with her; therefore, she is especially kind to him; she even ignored his mental disability, and the carelessness killed her. Gender inequality and gender problems are not the primary focus of this novella, but they are a prominent theme that is worth exploring.

3.3. The Conflict Between Races

Although the black slaves were already emancipated during the Great Depression and the blacks and the white should be nominally equal, the blacks still face discrimination. There are several moments throughout the novella where characters use racial slurs and nasty words. These depictions reflect the racist beliefs and language present at the time and contribute to the portrayal of ethnic conflict. Crooks, the only African American on the ranch, faces racial discrimination and segregation. He is isolated from the other workers and forced to live alone in the harness room because of his race. This reflects the racial tensions and prejudices prevalent during that era, highlighting the conflict between different races. He kept his distance from the whites and demanded that other people keep theirs. This is a way of self-protection; he knows that some whites dislike him, so he must pretend he’s not interested in the others as well; therefore, the boundaries between the races are created. However, the long-term loneliness Crooks faced caused him to desire friendship and companionship, just as he said: “A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is.....I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an’ he gets sick.” [7] And Crooks is the guy who is too lonely. He is complaining about the loneliness he gets, that he cannot be close to others or join them for entertainment. This is the result of his race, black don’t usually get along with white. Therefore, Crooks is isolated due to his black identity, which he cannot change but accepts. The hostility he faced from the whites is reflected through the line “Cause I’m black. They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you, all of you stink to me.” [7] There is a moment in the story when George is out with the other boys, and Lennie has to stay with Crooks. And Crooks said “Maybe you can see now. You got George. You know he’s goin’ to come back. S’pose you didn’t have nobody. S’pose you couldn’t go into the bunk house and play rummy ’cause you was black.” [7] Here, he again emphasized the mistreatment he faced due to his race. Although Lennie is also discriminated against by the others, at least he got George, Crooks got nobody. In conclusion, *Of Mice and Men* subtly discusses racial strife during the Great Depression. The novella draws attention to the racial prejudice and segregation that existed at the time via the figure of Crooks. Steinbeck’s depiction of racial tensions through Crooks’ isolation and restricted chances reveals society’s deep-seated racial conflict.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the novella *Of Mice and Men* represents the three types of conflicts during the Great Depression through the portrayal of typical characters, including the working-class George and Lennie, the capitalist class Curley, the only black worker Crooks, and the only female character, Curley’s wife. Specifically, the three conflicts are the one between the Working Class and the

Capitalist Class, the conflict between genders, and the conflict between races. All the stories and characters are presented in a realistic and sensible way, which corresponds to the form of realism. However, this paper also has limitations, such as that it only focuses on the conflicts between characters to interpret realism, but meanwhile there might be more evidence in the novella that can prove the presence of literary realism, which can be discussed in later papers. Moreover, traces of modernism can also be seen in the novella, such as the symbolic meaning of the mice. Therefore, the novella can be seen as a mixture of both realism and modernism, and the effect and importance of each require further discussion.

Acknowledgement

My deepest gratitude goes first and foremost to my high school, Vanke School Pudong, in Shanghai, China. This is where I first learned this novella, which gives me the interest and inspiration to complete this essay. Second, I would like to express my gratitude to the teaching assistant Jiayi Wang, who helped me forming the structure of the essay. Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has supported me during the writing.

References

- [1] LiteraryDevices Editors. (2023) *Realism-Examples and Definition of Realism*. <https://literarydevices.net/realism/>
- [2] Tanner, Alexandra. (2013) "Of Mice and Men Themes: The American Dream." <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/of-mice-and-men/themes/the-american-dream>
- [3] Adam Barone. (2023) *What Is the American Dream? Examples and How to Measure It*. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp>
- [4] Li Shi'an (2016). *Financial Reform and Its Impact in the United States during the Great Depression*. *Human history* (03), 99-112+159.
- [5] Kuang Xin Nian. (2014). *From Realism to Realism - The Understanding, Acceptance, and Interpretation of Realism in Chinese New Literature*. *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)* (04), 70-83.
- [6] Yu Yanping. (2012). *The Realistic Features in 'Red and Black'*. *Journal of Taiyuan City Vocational and Technical College* (11), 181-182 Doi: 10.16227/j.cnki.tytc.2012.11.012.
- [7] Steinbeck, J. (1986-06) *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Books, London.