

# “the [wall] of background”: The Cultural, Political, and Literary Contexts of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*

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There are subtleties in this ms. There’s the [wall] of background never stated. I say they are in it. (331)

—John Steinbeck, “The Long Valley Ledger,” qtd. in Benson

John Steinbeck enticingly suggests in “The Long Valley Ledger” that there is a “wall of background” behind *Of Mice and Men*, but this setting may be discovered only by subtle indirection because the historical and social contexts are never overtly given. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, published two years later, this novel has layers of meaning that readers must discover for themselves. Unlike the later novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, however, no omniscient commentator intrudes on *Of Mice and Men*’s narrative to provide a background for the primary narrative. Nevertheless, Steinbeck insists that this novel has just such a backdrop, leaving readers to seek out its nature for themselves. Considering the novel’s title, *Of Mice and Men*, and its allusion to the Robert Burns poem “To a Mouse,” leads to troubling overtones of World War II and the Great Depression. For Burns’s poem concludes with a strong sense of foreboding: the mouse need only be concerned with the *present* destruction of its nest, while the speaker must also be concerned with what the *future* holds. Although the speaker does not know outcomes for certain, he guesses what lies ahead—and fears. Then Carlson’s Luger pistol—associated with Nazi Germany—hints obliquely at international turmoil surrounding the rise of Adolf Hitler prior to World War II. Third, *Of Mice and Men* points to a background culture in which there is a troubling gender and racial bias, together with a strongly prejudiced lack of compassion for the mentally handicapped. Together, these “subtleties” in *Of Mice and Men*’s backdrop provide a glimpse of a larger human tragedy that

reaches beyond the boundaries of this small masterpiece about two bindlestiffs on a ranch and the pathos of their American Dream.



In “Deadly Kids, Stinking Dogs, and Heroes: The Best Laid Plans in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*,” Louis Owens maintains that in this novella, “Steinbeck is laying out a cautionary tale deeply engaged with the profound human crisis of his times” (8). This is a tale of the fate of innocence in a world gone awry. Accordingly, his “Long Valley Ledger” hints at “subtleties” and “[a wall] of background never stated.” Adamantly, the author continues, “I say they are in it” (qtd. in Benson 331). This background begins with the novel’s title, *Of Mice and Men*, an allusion to Robert Burns’s “To a Mouse: On Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785”—most befitting, since both novella and poem are devoted to the theme of the fate of innocence in a world gone awry. An explication of this poetic backdrop provides scope and meaning for the novel, together with a worldview of the pathos of the human condition. With empathy, Burns’s poem begins with the speaker’s address to a mouse, whose nest he has inadvertently, regrettably plowed up. Squealing in fright and protest, she scurries away as the plowman rues the roughshod human domination that has so rudely broken “Nature’s social union”—an ideal interrelationship of harmony, unity, and oneness encompassing all living beings. Such a worldview Burns the poet and Steinbeck the novelist share. Tiny, sleek of coat, cowering, timorous—the speaker thus lends beauty and character to this small victim of human disruption that has left ruin in its wake. A poor Scottish farmer, Burns himself had suffered deprivation and hardship, and the speaker in his poem has empathy for the little mouse, identifying with it as a “poor, earth-bound companion, / An’ fellow mortal” (ll. 5-8). Hence, the speaker understands the mouse’s need to steal occasional morsels from the harvest to keep from starving to death. Too, the speaker sees the end result of his plow’s destroying its winter nest. He recognizes the intense labor that has gone into building its leafy walls; observes that the winter weather has blighted the foliage needed to build another nest; and

foresees the bitter, biting December winds fast approaching. Despite foresight and good planning, all of the mouse's efforts have proved futile. The speaker identifies with its plight: "The best-laid schemes of mice and men," he bemoans, often go awry. And just as the mouse's foresight has been in vain, so the poet's own endeavors to maintain a livelihood have proved futile, and he himself has experienced misfortune, hunger, and loss. As Steward Cameron observes, some believe starvation may have been in part responsible for Robert Burns's death at the age of thirty-seven: "It was recorded that there was also a food shortage in the area that year," Cameron writes, and "given that he was not a wealthy man, Burns might have had trouble keeping food on the table. This may have weakened his ability to resist infections" (Cameron). With little prospect of financial improvement, Burns may well have faced the future with trepidation and fear. Incapable of anticipating the end result of the loss of her home, however, the mouse sees only the present plight, whereas the speaker anticipates a dire future. Thus, he proclaims her blessed in comparison with himself: "An' forward, tho' I canna see," he bemoans, "I guess an' fear! (ll. 27-28). Facing dark times, both poet and mouse are innocents in this poem—they have the best of intentions and have committed no wrong doing. Still, both are caught in a maelstrom of circumstances beyond their control.

Like Burns and his mouse, the innocents in *Of Mice and Men* are likewise caught in a whirlwind of events seemingly beyond their control. From the time he was a baby until she died, Lennie Small's Aunt Clara had been a caregiver for the childlike, mentally handicapped boy. Although she is now dead, Aunt Clara is nonetheless a substantial presence in the novel, appearing in memory and vision as a stern but understanding and compassionate woman who saw to Lennie's needs and taught him manners—in the closing scene, he listens to her ghostly appearance politely, referring to her as "Aunt Clara, ma'am" (J. Steinbeck 97). Despite his mental handicap, then, she had given him a proper, Southern upbringing—as his addition of "ma'am" to her name suggests. In the opening scene, Lennie remembers her fondly as the lady who used to give him all the mice she could find because she knew he liked to pet

them—until she stopped providing them when she discovered that he always killed them accidentally. As a witness to Aunt Clara’s loving attention, George reminds Lennie that she had also given him a rubber mouse, which he had refused because “it wasn’t no good to pet” (9). Even though she is now dead, she still wields an influence over both men. When Lennie threatens to go off into the hills and live by himself in a cave, George reminds him that his “Aunt Clara wouldn’t like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead” (12). Later, at the bunkhouse, George tells Slim that he had personally known Lennie’s Aunt Clara, who “took him when he was a baby, and raised him up” (37). Keeping each other company and looking out for each other, since that time Lennie and George roam from place to place, from job to job together. In the tragic scene when Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife, a budding friendship forms as they talk about all of the soft things he likes to stoke and pet. When she tells him that she likes “to feel silk an’ velvet” and asks whether he likes “to feel velvet,” Lennie remembers “a lady” who had given him a piece of the luxuriously soft cloth for his very own. Delighted with the memory of a close and loving relationship, he adds, “An’ that lady was—my own Aunt Clara” (85). “My own Aunt Clara”—thus Lennie fondly remembers the caregiver who had been devoted to his happiness and well-being.

Sadly, in the final scene, Aunt Clara appears to Lenny in a vision after he has inadvertently killed Curley’s wife. Frightened by his action, he sees his aunt clearly as “a little fat old woman,” with thick bull’s eye glasses, wearing “a huge gingham apron with pockets, . . . starched and clean,” hands placed akimbo on her hips as she frowns at him with disapproval (J. Steinbeck 96). She scolds him for his deed. Through his bitter sobbing, Lennie cries out to her, calling her “Aunt Clara, ma’am,” telling her that he has tried not to do bad things, that he has not meant to hurt anyone. Clearly, Lennie required another caregiver after his Aunt Clara’s demise. He should have been placed under the custody of someone who, like her, would watch over him and prevent him from doing harm although he intends no hurt. Like Burns’s mouse, Lennie is an innocent, like an infant or a toddler who should have been under

constant supervision. But while some of the other characters have recognized Lennie's infantile mentality, no one has either provided appropriate care or attempted to find someone who will tend to him adequately, protect him from himself, and look after his needs. George has stated, "There ain't no more harm in him that *a kid* neither, except he's so strong," and Curley's wife has told Lennie, "You're a kinda nice fella. Jus' like *a big baby*" (J. Steinbeck 41; 86, emphasis added). The fault, then, lies with those who should have provided this care—not with Lennie, who loves to pet soft things, but does not know his own strength. As Louis Owens insightfully observes, despite the seeming inevitability of the sad outcome of Lennie's life, there are viable alternatives for each of the killings in this novel. George does not have to shoot Lennie, Owens maintains: "There's no reason at all that Lennie could not have been locked up where he wouldn't be able to accidentally kill things" (6).

Further, Owens observes the "godlike" Slim as the one who validates the arbitrary killings in the novel. With Lennie's body lying dead beside him, George is sitting on the bank of the Salinas River when the other ranch hands arrive on the scene. Owens writes,

Slim came directly to George and sat down beside him, sat very close to him. "Never you mind," said Slim, "A guy got to sometime" (104). Slim is clearly displacing Lennie who in the novel's opening scenes sat "close to George." But more interestingly here, in Slim's words Steinbeck removes the killing of Lennie from the status of an isolated event and places it in a pattern of behavior: something that a guy has to do sometimes, like the drowning of puppies or the shooting of old dogs. After Slim once again validates George's action by saying "You hadda, George. I swear you hadda." Slim adds, "Come on with me," and the two walk up the same trail that George and Lennie had walked down in the novel's first scene. (8)

Slim's asking George to go into town with him, Owens asserts, is an invitation equivalent to "inviting George into a new belief system, an altered way of viewing the world" (8). George will be purged of the innocence that Lennie represents. And he will be changed from a dreamer to a pragmatist, ironically perhaps even one "sent forth

to do God's work, as Slim defines it" (Owens 8). By his words and actions, Slim has validated a chilling new world order for George. Reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party, which was on the rise in Germany even as Steinbeck wrote this novel, Slim's new world order rationalizes and validates the elimination of the weak, the old, the infirm, and those whom Curley's wife calls the "dum-dums" of this world (J. Steinbeck 75). Hence, Slim's implied definition of "God's work," as Owens puts it, is to disregard and rid ourselves of the disadvantaged and weak among us.

But in the broader wall of background of *Of Mice and Men* is an opposing definition of "God's work" that Steinbeck, raised Episcopalian, knew well. In the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25:35-40, Christ comes to judge the nations, placing the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. The king calls those on the right hand "blessed," for they now inherit the kingdom, and he provides the basis for his decision: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me" (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 25: 35-36). When those who are so blessed are puzzled and ask the king when they did these things for him, he responds simply: "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to *one of the least of these brothers of mine*, you did it to me" (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 25:40, emphasis added). And Steinbeck's simple story is about "one of the least of these," a brother of the Christ. As the biblical story goes, an opposite fate is in store for those goats on the left side: "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you have neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you have neglected to do it to me." The story concludes, "And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life" (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 25: 45-46).

To use the biblical designation of these childlike misfortunates of this world, like Burns's mouse, Lennie is one of "the least of these." This novella, then, raises troubling questions for today's society, for it is a story of outcasts. Other than Curley, whose father runs the ranch, none of the ranch hands has a real home or place to call his own. All are outliers, different from the mainstream of

society, with marginal value only as long as the current job holds out. The novel's very title, therefore, leads to this most problematic wall of background—leaving vexing questions of what to do with “the least of these” in our own midst but—as usual with Steinbeck—providing no clear answers. For all is left in the hands and on the conscience of the reader.



But that which is left to the human conscience may be quite readily suppressed and designated to dwell in the dark recesses of the id, subject to emotions and impulses rather than to rational processes of the mind, compassionate dictates of the conscience, or empathic leanings of the heart. The wall of background in *Of Mice and Men* is hence subject to the vagaries of its time, when issues with vast international significance were either suppressed or ignored. Caught in the throes of the Great Depression that extended from 1929 to 1939, the United States failed to heed the warning signs leading up to World War II, which was declared in 1939 and lasted until 1945. Only on the peripheries of its story does *Of Mice and Men* hint at the atrocities taking place in Nazi Germany at the time—persecution of Jews, murder of the mentally and physically disabled, suppression of free speech, book burnings, a veritable onslaught of propaganda promoting white supremacy (*Holocaust Encyclopedia*).

Still, there is an oblique allusion to Nazi Germany in Steinbeck's repetitive reference to a German-made Luger pistol, a weapon of choice in both World War I and World War II. Owens maintains that

*Of Mice and Men* is an extraordinarily efficient and carefully crafted little book in which every word, every sound, every nuance matters, from the off-stated clanging of horseshoes to the slant of light across the bunkhouse doorway. However, one glaring bit of questionable writing stands out. Why, one wonders, does Steinbeck feel it necessary to repeat the name of Carlson's gun so many times? . . . Why repeat the name of the gun five times in such rapid succession that the repetition stands out glaringly? (5)

Owens concludes that Steinbeck here used repetition as a rhetorical device to draw the careful reader's attention to a German-made weapon, the atrocities taking place in Hitler's Germany, and parallels with the three killings in the novel—Slim's killing newborn puppies; Carlson's shooting Candy's beloved old sheepdog; and George's dispatching his companion, Lennie. With Steinbeck, something always lies beneath the surface of his writings—a backdrop hinted at, situations left in the hands of the reader, characters frozen in a cinematic final scene as in *East of Eden*, leaving the rest of the story squarely in the hands of the reader.

While the troubling international threat remains hidden in the background, only hinted at by Steinbeck's oft-emphasized detail of the German Luger pistol, the era known as the Great Depression is a more immediate and obvious concern in *Of Mice and Men*'s story of bindlestiffs working on a ranch. These tramps, or hobos, traveled about the country carrying all their worldly goods on their backs as they sought for work, a place to sleep, something to eat. History.com reports that the Great Depression of 1929 to 1939

was the deepest and longest-lasting economic downturn in the history of the Western industrialized world. In the United States, the Great Depression began soon after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a panic and wiped out millions of investors. . . . By 1933, when the Great Depression reached its nadir, some 13 to 15 million Americans were unemployed and nearly half of the country's banks had failed. Though the relief and reform measures put into place by President Franklin D. Roosevelt helped lessen the worst effects of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the economy would not fully turn around until after 1939, when World War II kicked American industry into high gear.

Bracketed by the Great Depression and World War II, this era was marked by deprivation and hardship, with thousands left homeless and wandering. In the prologue titled "Rock Bottom" in *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America: 1932–1972*, historian William Manchester states that Steinbeck himself felt the bitter impact of extreme poverty and need:

Eminent writers were among the very poor in 1932, and some have left a record of what transient life was like. John Steinbeck washed his clothes with soap made from pork fat, wood ashes, and salt. He couldn't even afford postage on his manuscripts: his agent paid it, although none of them sold then. The prospect of illness, he later recalled, frightened the nomads most of all: "You had to have money to be sick then. Dentistry was out of the question, with the result that my teeth went badly to pieces." (20)

Such is the world of *Of Mice and Men*; and, as Mimi Gladstein so astutely observes, it is primarily written within the context of a man's world and primarily devoted to the perspective of white males who dominate over the bunkhouse. And these men have power to determine the fate of the weak ones in their midst: Lennie—the "dum-dum" as Curley's wife calls him—and crippled old Candy—whose beloved, crippled old sheep dog is shot. But there are two significant voices other than those of white men on the ranch—they are on the periphery, but important nonetheless. And the plight of these misfortunates is even more dire than that of the white males—the young, unnamed girl merely designated as "Curley's wife" and the black stable buck, Crooks. Issues of gender and racism, then, are clearly a part of Steinbeck's "[wall] of background."



Into this white, male-dominated world, Steinbeck introduces the most unlikely of characters: first, a young girl, a mere teenager, who, at odds with her mother, has married in haste and now—as the old adage has it—has plenty of time to regret at leisure and in loneliness and, second, a crippled black stable buck, who is aptly named Crooks. In his biography of Steinbeck, Jay Parini views *Of Mice and Men* as a book whose "subject is the nature of innocence . . . explored with compassion and skill," but he unfortunately excludes Curley's wife from the other innocents in the story (183). Rather, Parini takes a stereotypically male stance in discussing this girl/woman trapped in a marriage to a cad and forced to live on a ranch devoid of companionship of any sort—male or female. Describing those whom George and Lennie encounter at the ranch bunkhouse, Parini

writes, “They brush up against Curley, the evil son of the boss, and Curley’s wife—the seductive but rather dim and insensitive woman who unwittingly tempts Lennie and *gets herself killed by him*” (184, emphasis added). Here Parini does not recognize that both Lennie and Curley’s wife are innocents trapped by circumstances beyond their control. To illustrate, in their final scene together, Lennie is completely unaware of his own strength and inadvertently strangles Curley’s wife while stroking her soft hair. He had only wanted to feel her hair. She had only wanted to share a moment with a newfound friend. Isolated and lonely, Curley’s wife is a young girl longing for a friend, not a sexual encounter. There is Sophoclean irony and pathos as these two naïfs come together in a final, fateful moment. To state that she “gets herself killed by him” is to perpetuate the old misconception that women are to blame for their own abuse at the hands of men.

While Parini places the blame for this stereotypical stance on Steinbeck, his own telling of the story is nevertheless slanted. His account takes into consideration neither the irony of the situation nor the narrator’s own tender view of Curley’s wife after her death. Thus Parini places blame on an innocent girl/woman—not only by asserting that Curley’s wife “gets herself killed”—the use of passive voice automatically places blame on the victim—but also by going further to imply that women in general are responsible for the world’s ills. Parini writes,

Steinbeck here takes a traditionally sexist view of the world, seeing the male environment of the bunkhouse as a kind of idyll that is interrupted by the evil woman who cannot help herself. She is a creature of her own whims, her physical passion for men and her need for their company. Eve once again ruins everything in the Garden of Eden. (184)

Sadly, this stereotypically patriarchal and false view is still in currency.

But to look at this male “idyll” from within the context of this very young girl/woman’s life thus far is to view her quite differently from the *femme fatale*. Actually, Steinbeck draws her portrait

delicately and sparingly. She is only a teenager; she has married Curley to get away from a strict home environment after a quarrel with her mother; and her highest goal in life is to be a movie star. After the dispute with her mother, she storms out of the house; goes to the Riverside Dance Palace; and, in a snit of teenage rebellion, marries Curley all in one tempestuous night. She now finds herself trapped on a ranch with Curley and the ranch hands—with no one with whom she can converse, no friend or confidante. Her only asset, she believes, is her youthful beauty, which she tries to enhance by making herself up like a movie star. Late in the novel, she tells Lennie, “I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely.” Hence, seeking attention, she goes to the bunkhouse where the ranch hands are her only human contact. But these callous men are incapable of viewing her as a person in her own right or of seeing her as a friendless human being. Rather, they look at her suspiciously, making her the object of male ridicule and lust. In looking at the character of Curley’s wife, therefore, it is instructive to read between the lines with the heart as well as the mind and, imaginatively, to walk in this character’s shoes. It is enlightening to observe the whole picture of this teenage girl/woman as Steinbeck has drawn her so beautifully, with such pathos.

Originally titled “Something That Happened,” this story’s climax occurs during a chance encounter between Lennie and Curley’s wife in the barn. As they sit side by side on the barn floor in the hay, she begs Lennie to talk to her: “‘Why can’t I talk to you? . . . Wha’s the matter with me?’ she cried. ‘Ain’t I got a right to talk to nobody. Whatta they think I am, anyways? You’re a nice guy. I don’t know why I can’t talk to you. I ain’t doin’ no harm to you’” (J. Steinbeck 83). Earlier, the black “stable buck” Crooks had voiced the same human need for companionship: “A guy needs somebody—to be near him. . . . I tell ya a guy gets *too lonely* (68-69, emphasis added). With Curley’s wife in mind, Crooks’s complaint could be translated as “*A girl needs somebody. . . . A girl gets too lonely.*” Philosophically, Crooks tells Lennie that the end result of such extreme loneliness is that a person “got nothing to measure by,” for, as Steinbeck implies, our very sense of reality is only

affirmed by checking with another human being (69). Steinbeck thus draws intricate and intimate portraits of what it means to be truly human—or not. In this state of dire need for human contact, Curley's wife reaches out to Lennie in an appeal for recognition of her very personhood.

But Lennie counters her appeal, stating that George has warned him to have nothing to do with her, had smeared the girl's character with a broad brush, calling her "a bitch," "poison," "jail bait" (J. Steinbeck 30). What follows is a Tristram-Shandy-like exchange as she tells him about her dreams of becoming an actress and of events leading up to her precipitous and unfortunate marriage to Curley, and Lennie tells her about his dream of owning rabbits.

"I don' *like* Curley. He ain't a nice fella," she confides.

"I like to pet nice things with my fingers, sof' things," he tells her. (J. Steinbeck 85)

On the topic of "sof' things," they connect on a common interest in a love of soft, elegant things—silk, velvet. His Aunt Clara had given him a piece of velvet once, Lennie remembers, and wonders what happened to it. And tragically, she invites him to touch the softness of her hair. Briefly, the two have shared a beautiful moment in time; sadly, however, Lennie does not know his own strength and has a long history of inadvertently killing those soft things he loves to pet. Both of their motives are without guile. She does not intend to tempt, or seduce, him. He does not intend to break her neck or to hurt her in any way.

In his "Long Valley Ledger," Steinbeck writes of his own struggles with self-esteem; his frustrations with his writing; and, most interestingly, his intentions for writing *Of Mice and Men*: "This little novel could be fine if I could find the beauty to put into it. I know the way" (qtd. in Benson 331). As carefully crafted and structured as a lovely poem, this novella undoubtedly has the beauty that the author so ardently desired. A part of that beauty lies in the tender portrayal of the aftermath of the death of Curley's wife. Those who have experienced the death of someone dearly loved will

readily recognize the poignancy of this scene. There is a stasis as time seems to stand still, and the very world grows more still. Even the shouts of the horseshoe game outside the barn grow quieter as Curley's wife lies dead, her body half covered with hay. Gently, sweetly, the narrator captures the poignancy of the scene: "She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young." Then, "as happens sometimes," he writes, "a *moment* settled and hovered and remained for much more than a *moment*. And sound stopped and movement stopped for much, much more than a *moment*" (J. Steinbeck 88, emphasis added). The incremental repetition of "moment" shows the true horror of the death of youth and beauty—time itself seems to stand still in order to grieve. Harry Thornton Moore, early Steinbeck critic, observed that "Steinbeck is the poet of our dispossessed" (72). And in this scene, Steinbeck's poetic gift lends dignity and pathos to the premature death of a lonely, unhappy young girl, estranged from family and friends. She is far, far from being "the seductive but rather dim and insensitive woman who unwittingly tempts Lennie and *gets herself killed by him*," as Parini depicts her from a stereotypically male vantage point. Quite the opposite, as Steinbeck draws her portrait so carefully and lovingly, she is, along with Lennie, one of the innocents in this story.



In the character of Curley's wife, then, issues of gender lurk in the backdrop of *Of Mice and Men*, there for the careful reader to discern. The issue of race is also a part of that backdrop, prominently highlighted in the entirety of chapter four in the character of the black stable buck, Crooks. Unlike Parini, who considers *Of Mice and Men* to be a book whose "subject is the nature of innocence, . . . explored with compassion and skill" (183), Charles Johnson's "Reading the Character of Crooks" maintains that "loneliness and homelessness are the central themes." Johnson states further that Crooks "epitomizes these experiences more completely than all the other characters," and he describes the plight of the ranch's Black stable buck: "Crooks generally has no one to talk to, black or white" (George and Heavilin 116-117). Providing the contemporary context