

## **Binary opposition of the characters in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: From Derridean perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The research explores a new dimension of critique in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* from the perspective of post structuralism. The era of 1960s is marked as 'Decentering of Intellectual Cosmos,' and political anxiety. It results in increased interest in alternative radical philosophies which are critical of western dominant culture by exposing underlying assumptions of western norms. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* deals with the problem of 'Centering' and constructing the meaning of the text. The novel narrates a gloomy anecdote, a folktale of man's journey through a world of pitfall, ruthless, and inhuman experiences. By applying theory, the novel becomes a critique of western norms. The theory puts forth the ideological position of an author by structuring binary opposition at the center of a language in the construction of a meaning. The textual analysis of a novel from qualitative approach, gives the findings that Steinbeck organizes the characters in dichotomous relationship. The quality of good/bad is shown the pairs of such as George/Lennie, Carlson/Candy, Slim/Crooks and Curley/Curley's wife. The textual analysis of a novel from qualitative approach, gives the findings that Steinbeck organizes the characters in dichotomous relationship. The quality of good/bad is shown the pairs of such as George/Lennie, Carlson/Candy, Slim/Crooks and Curley/Curley's wife.

**Keywords:** Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, binary opposition

### **1. Introduction**

For more than a half century, Poststructuralist has demonstrated that all sorts of texts from within deconstruct themselves. One of the core notions for the presentation of this revolution found in the concept of the "binary pair." Derrida constructed his theory on Saussure's theory of language which denotes that literature is made of language and the comprehension of literary texts involved some ideas about how language works itself. However, Derrida confronted to his idea of the "binary opposition". Since, it was, as Derrida thought, no genuine correspondence between a pair of conception. On his lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"(1966) at the colloquium on Structuralism at Johns Hopkins University, Jacques Derrida offered his theory on an apparent rapture in Intellectual life. He marked the event or time as a "decentering" of the former intellectual cosmos. Instead of progress or divergence from an identified center, Derrida described this "event" as a kind of "play."

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* walks up from the notion of binary pairs in the characters. Person Jr (1995) suggested that *Of Mice and Men* subvert conservative concept of masculinity (Patriarchal, heterosexual and phallogocentric). All the characters in the novel correspond to the deep structure of binary opposition which became the true identity of them.

*Of Mice and Men* is a gloomy folktale of character's journey through a world of pitfalls, ruthless and inhuman experiences. All the characters tried to owe a dream of having tis own ranch which symbolically suggest the occupation of center of social structure. It was all doomed and that it has shown that the obstacles have blocked their ways and happiness seems to be a human handicap that

greatly affects their hopes. It is a nonetheless a pure classic tragedy, profoundly connected with human weakness, sufferings and rushing from the heights of pity to the depth of distress. Steinbeck structures the novel with "American Dream." All the characters took shelter and aspire for it which proposes Lacanian stage of Symbolic order. Lisca (1958) [7] said that the story reveals the same kind of dichotomy as *In the Dubious Battle*. The opposition might be the conscious and unconscious, the Id and the ego or other potentials of abilities which have same structural association to each other that to work with Lennie and George.

### **2. Literature Review**

Burgum (1946) states that in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck creates characters that evoke complex sociological attitudes—some defined, some ambiguous—regarding the underprivileged. Burgum suggests that Steinbeck leaves the reader pondering at the end of the story, unclear about what attitude to take toward the moral dilemma surrounding Lennie and George.

In terms of literary criticism, Leslie Fiedler's (1960) controversial book *Love and Death in the American Novel*. The controversy centered on Fiedler's thesis that the American novel is distinguished by an archetypal sequence of close relationships between "male pairs,"

Freud (1961) [4] *Of Mice and Men*'s solution to this strangling bind is the rescue of men by men from the grip of women. of course, it vigorously promoted the significance of a boy's separation from his mother in achieving his sense of masculinity. Here the struggle manifests itself in the creation of what anthropologists call "men's house institutions."

Emery (1992) <sup>[3]</sup> writes in her article that textual evidence suggests that John Steinbeck, as chronicler of America's social inequities, intended *Of Mice and Men* as a critique of our society's most fundamental injustice. George and Lennie represent the duality of masculinity and femininity, their partnership a kind of marriage.

Hadella (1995) studied that the 1990s also brought a number of studies of Steinbeck's supposed "misogynistic" portrait of Curley's wife while still other critics began to examine the "supposed" homosexual innuendos that had caused numerous objections by conservative readers and that accounted for the fact that the novel had become a frequent target for advocates of censorship and book-banning.

Ansari (2015) presented similar view of delineating woman's position where male literature is biased because everything is written by them comes under the system of patriarchy. John Steinbeck has been criticized mostly from the critic's milieu that he used abusive language towards women or presented them as tool in the hands of men. In *Of Mice and Men*, there is only one character which is female and certain indication of women like Suzzy's house which is a brothel where men used get fresh. The death of Curley's wife in the novel is horrible to study it.

### 3. Problem Statement

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* deals with the problem of 'Centering' the meaning of the text. The research questions on Steinbeck's stance, regarding racial discrimination, class distinction, status of a women and his views about Western society. The research explores that how Steinbeck's creative technique of binary opposition in characters' construction helped him in portraying good and bad.

### 4. Significance of Research

The research has academic and social value. The research attempts to explain a person's position in society and such values are not fixed but rather social fabrication. The 'Centering' approach is an act of seeking order and harmony in society while, 'Decentering' is deconstruction of male centered approach. The application of theory to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* seems an unexplored ground and has a greater significant for academicians who are interested in Post structuralism and Steinbeck's novels. Therefore, Poststructuralist theory carries implication far beyond literary criticism.

### 5. Methodology

The research follows the method of qualitative approach which performed a textual analysis of the novel. The technique of binary opposition is the semantic mechanism, concerned with Saussurian structuralism i-e to understand the underlying structure of human experience which exist at the level of langue, whether we are examining the structures of the literature or speculating on the relationship between the structures of literature and the structures of human consciousness.

The Structuralist also claims that literature which is fundamentally a language, a complex system formed from 'Signifier' and 'Signified'. The former is the phonetic utterances and the latter is the concept. What quickly is become apparent from the understanding is that words don't have meaning in and off themselves. They generate meaning only in relation with other words i-e Binary Opposition. Thus, to understand the nature of character Lennie, to say

what is different from the character of George in *Of Mice and Men*. So the narrative characteristics of the novel bear fertile ground for the structural features which allows us to make significant meaning of the text.

How the analysis has been carried out to queue certain characteristics of characters have shared the right and left side of the slash in the binary opposition? The analysis of the novel is designed through inductive reasoning. The selected narrations from the novel are gathered and designed in inductive arguments. The main criteria are the inferential link between the premises and the conclusion. The link is on personal interpretation, supported by the textual evidence. the evidence selected may be through 'Sign' in the novel such as Lennie's love for 'rabbits' and George ultimate dislikes for it. Similarly Carlson showed his hatred for 'dogs' and Candy's high moral ground for the loyalty of 'dogs'. The 'Bunkhouse' in the novel in which Crooks and Curley's wife were not allowed to enter, are some of the more signs which expressed the patriarchal system of language.

Moreover, the inductive arguments are also meaningfully supported from the authorities of the other sources. The appeal to critics' views on the particular propositions would make a cogent argument. The more we get similar opinions from the reliable sources; the stronger will be the argument. So there is good but not conclusive reason to believe it.

The research however is not attempted to bring forth the meaning of the text from the character relation to their signs, but from the point of view of Post structuralism, where linguistic meaning 'daffer' from one interpretation to another. The structure of binary opposition that are centered to the logocentric language, are actually hierarchies and they are not simply define as difference alone but by privileging one term at the expense of the other. Thus, such hierarchies in the novel: George/Lennie, Slim/Crooks, Carlson/Candy and Curley/Curley's wife are reversible and whole oppositions are undermined and collapsed.

### 6. Analysis

Steinbeck's all novels including *Of Mice and Men* are remarkable for its opening scene. The readers preoccupied with natural landscape, blowing of tender breeze and animals like water snakes, rabbits and heron and no sign of human beings. Lisca (1958, P: 37) <sup>[7]</sup> illustrates that the river in the opening part of the novel "symbolizes the retreat from the world to a primeval innocence". The opening scene suggests that it is the initial days of the earth and later part is introduced with humans. It is easy to propose hypothetically that novel asserts a symbolic image of the "earth" and the characters in the novel invariably suggesting populated society. are In this research, the novel is hypothetically designed as the 'earth' and the 'characters' are the populated society. Therefore, the task of interpreting text from the poststructuralist view will be easy for us to determine the real intentions of the Steinbeck.

The novel introduces us from the two migrants- George and Lennie. Who are said to be the first pair of opposition in the novel. Steinbeck's characterization of both characters expresses the opposition. The author describes the opposition directly in the following lines from the novel:

*The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a*

*thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely. (P.02)*

The readers are compelled to see the nature of both characters through lens of binary opposition. All the good qualities are attached to the character of George such as his normal physique, fixed self, his vigilant movement and intellectual curiosity. On the other hand, Lennie is described as animal behavior like a bull, mentally retarded, sloppy physique and depended nature. Spilke (1972, P: 171) states about George “puts him by literary allusion near the godhead, above subhuman creatures, able to judge whether they should live or die”. At the end of the novel when Lennie was shot down the by the mob of these subhuman creatures and took down like a hound in the forest, his killing has been rightly justified because he is unprivileged of all rights of the human entity.

Another pair of opposition is indicated in the character of Slim and Crooks. Slim has been called by Steinbeck as a prince of ranch. He is a man who is dependably depicted in lieu of splendor and pride. From Weeks (2009, P: 27) point of view what “I mean Slim’s authority and Candy’s dog mean more to me than drama in the barn or at the pool”. His behavior outlines an effective masculinization of classic manhood. Steinbeck describes him in such words:

*There was a gravity in his manner  
and a quiet so profound that all  
talk stopped when he spoke.(P.42)*

Slim’s other side of alienation is reflected in the character of Crooks. He is all which Slim does not have such as black, cripple, stable buck and invisible in the world of physically powerful white men. Nonetheless, he too is aware from his precarious condition and shattered identity which expressed in these words:

*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. (p.84)*

Crooks has been banished by the other characters from their quarters. He lives in the animal’s stable buck and isolated from the rest of the men. It suggests that Crooks has been placed by Steinbeck at the margin of the social structure.

Additional dichotomy can be found in the characters of Carlson and Candy. The character of Carlson is depicted traditionally farm man with anger, brutish and proclaiming his hegemony on the others. Levant (1974, P: 80) has a similar critique of his character that ‘Carlson’s thinking is that the group has a right to wrong the individual’. It is true to his relation with Candy who is an old swamper, aged and physical impairment. His social segregation can be seen from his affinity with the dog. When Carlson senselessly killed his dog, Candy predicted his state would be similar to his dog. He expressed his depressed condition in these words:

*You seen what they done to my dog tonight?  
They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else.  
When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me.  
(P.75)*

He once objected to George that men around him won’t listen to him and not even present his own comments. He did so because he is not authorized by the others in their social structure.

The character of Curley and Curley’s wife is the very instances of ramifying strong and weak, independent and dependent respectively. Canby (2009, P: 07) <sup>[1]</sup> describe both the characters “Curley, the ex-prizefighter, and on Curley’s wife, a poor little prostitute infected by egoism”. Curley’s wife is a single female character in the novel. She represents a typical woman of phallogocentric society who is considered her a frail, sexual and symbolic archetype of Eve, uprooting the paradise of men. She called with derogatory terms like “jail bait,” and she is sexually abused by his husband Curley. Curley is the master of everything and he asserts his stance as an absolute truth. Her relation with Curley is unsatisfactory and that could be viewed by the other characters as well. Their relation is expressed by Candy in his conversation with George in these words:

*Well, that glove’s fulla vaseline. Vaseline?  
What the hell for? Well, I tell ya what Curley  
says he’s keepin’ that hand soft for his wife. (P.34)*

Curley isolated her from the rest of ranch men and forcibly restricted her to her house. It is suggested that woman in this world of man has no identity and her meaning of existence can only be possible in relation of Curley. i-e binary opposition.

## 7. Conclusion

The novel was investigated in the light of problem posed by Poststructuralism. It was a searched for the ‘Center’ of the text. Paul (2009, P: 16) tells that “those who speak of books hunt down such observations and interpret them in terms of social significance”. The analysis successfully brings out good/bad qualities among characters.

From the broader of view interpretation, four major pairs have been obtained from the textual analysis of the novel. These pairs are the ramifying of dichotomy in the shape of: George/Lennie, Slim/Crooks, Carlson/Candy and Curley/Curley’s wife.

1. George/Lennie relation has formed in good/bad qualities such as Man/Animal, Mind/Body, Sane/Insanity, and Master/Slave.
2. Slim/Crooks relation is structured in binary qualities such as White/Black, Active/Passive, Master/Slave.
3. Carlson/Candy relation is marked in dichotomy in Man/Animal, Master/Slave and Aggressor/Pacifier.
4. The last relation is between Curley and Curley’s wife whose qualities are shown in dichotomy of Man/woman, Form/Formless, Sexually actor aggressor/Sexually receiver, prey.

It was an attempt to expose how the society has created master-slave relationship through a dominant ideology. To Derrida and to Poststructuralists, these relationships have

never been structured in an absolute form but on contrary a self-fabricated perspective.

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