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MOTIF AND PATTERN IN "OF MICE AND MEN"

PETER LISCA

SHORTLY AFTER SENDING OFF THE MANUSCRIPT for *Of Mice and Men,* Steinbeck wrote to his agents, "I'm sorry that you do not find the new book as large in subject as it should be. I probably did not make my subjects and symbols clear. The microcosm is difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over." Despite the agents' initial disappointment, *Of Mice and Men* became a great success as novel, play, and motion picture. That Steinbeck's audience found his "subjects and symbols clear" is doubtful; that the critics did not is certain. For the most part, those critics who saw nothing beyond the obvious plot disliked the work immensely. Those who suspected more important levels of meaning were unable to offer specific and thorough explication. Today, almost twenty years later, it is generally accepted that the success of *Of Mice and Men* was an accident of history: Steinbeck merely cashed in on his audience's readiness to shed a tear, even a critical tear, over the plight of lonely migrant laborers. As one critic put it ten years later, "This is a negligible novel, seemingly written with a determined eye on the cash register."[1]

This essay is a much belated attempt to discover just what Steinbeck's "subjects and symbols" are and how they are utilized in *Of Mice and Men,* which he once referred to as "a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world."

To present his larger subject in terms of a microcosm Steinbeck makes use of three incremental motifs: symbol, action, and language. All three of these motifs are presented in the opening scene, are contrapuntally developed through the story, and come together again at the end. The first symbol in the novel, and the primary one, is the little spot by the river where the story begins and ends. The book opens with a description of this place by the river, and we first see George and Lennie as they enter this place from the highway to an outside world. It is significant that they prefer spending the night here rather than going on to the bunkhouse at the ranch.

Steinbeck's novels and stories often contain groves, willow thickets by a river, and caves which figure prominently in the action. There

[1] George D. Snell, *The Shapers of American Fiction* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1947), p. 193.

are, for example, the grove in *To a God Unkown,* the place by the river in the Junius Maltby story, the two caves and a willow thicket in *The Grapes of Wrath,* the cave under the bridge in *In Dubious Battle,* the caves in *The Wayward Bus,* and the thicket and cave in *The Pearl.* For George and Lennie, as for other Steinbeck heroes, coming to a cave or thicket by the river symbolizes a retreat from the world to a primeval innocence. Sometimes, as in *The Grapes of Wrath,* this retreat has explicit overtones of a return to the womb and rebirth. In the opening scene of *Of Mice and Men* Lennie twice mentions the possibility of hiding out in a cave, and George impresses on him that he must return to this thicket by the river when there is trouble.

While the cave or the river thicket is a "safe place," it is physically impossible to remain there, and this symbol of primeval innocence becomes translated into terms possible in the real world. For George and Lennie it becomes "a little house an' a couple of acres." Out of this translation grows a second symbol, the rabbits, and this symbol serves several purposes. By the figure of synecdoche it comes to stand for the "safe place" itself, making a much more easily manipulated symbol than the "house an' a couple of acres." Also, through Lennie's love for the rabbits Steinbeck is able not only to dramatize Lennie's desire for the "safe place," but to define the basis of that desire on a very low level of consciousness—the attraction to soft, warm fur, which is for Lennie the most important aspect of their plans.

This transference of symbolic value from the farm to the rabbits is important also because it makes possible another motif, the motif of action. This is introduced in the first scene by the dead mouse which Lennie is carrying in his pocket (much as Tom carries the turtle in *The Grapes of Wrath*). As George talks about Lennie's attraction to mice, it becomes evident that the symbolic rabbits will come to the same end—crushed by Lennie's simple blundering strength. Thus Lennie's killing of mice and later his killing of the puppy set up a motif of action, a pattern, which the reader expects to be carried out again. George's story about Lennie and the little girl with the red dress, which he tells twice, contributes to this expectancy of pattern, as does the shooting of Candy's dog, the crushing of Curley's hand, and the frequent appearances of Curley's wife. All these actions are patterns of the mice motif and predict the fate of the rabbits and thus the fate of the dream of a "safe place."

The third motif, that of language, is also present in the opening scene. Lennie asks George, "Tell me—like you done before," and George's words are obviously in the nature of a ritual. "George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically, as though he

had said them many times before" (p. 28).[2] The element of ritual is stressed by the fact that even Lennie has heard it often enough to remember its precise language: "*'An' live off the fatta the lan'*. . . . An' have *rabbits*. Go on George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about . . . .'" (p. 29). This ritual is performed often in the story, whenever Lennie feels insecure. And of course it is while Lennie is caught up in this dream vision that George shoots him, so that on one level the vision is accomplished—the dream never interrupted, the rabbits never crushed.

The highly patterned effect achieved by these incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language is the knife edge on which criticism of *Of Mice and Men* divides. Mark Van Doren, for example, sees this patterning of events as evidence of a mechanical structure: "Lennie, you see, cannot help shaking small helpless creatures until their necks are broken, just as Curley cannot help being a beast of jealousy. They are wound up to act that way, and the best they can do is to run down; which is what happens when Steinbeck comes to his last mechanical page."[3] This view is shared by Joseph Wood Krutch, who insists that "everything from beginning to end" is "as shamelessly cooked up as, let us say, the death of Little Nell."[4] On the other hand, Mr. Stark Young sees this patterning as a virtue: "And instead of losing . . . by this evident manipulation for effect, the play gains in its total impact and imaginative compulsion. In the characters, too, we get a sense of arrangement or design, so definitely carried through that we have almost a sense of types, an almost classic designation and completeness to each."[5] Frank H. O'Hara comes to a similar conclusion, though admitting that "the constituents of melodrama are all here."[6]

Thus while Steinbeck's success in creating a pattern has been acknowledged, criticism has been divided as to the effect of this achievement. On one side it is claimed that this strong patterning creates a sense of contrivance and mechanical action; and on the other that the patterning actually gives a meaningful design to the story, a tone of classic fate. What is obviously needed here is some objective critical tool for determining under what conditions a sense of inevitability (to use a neutral word) should be experienced as catharis ef-

[2] This and all further references to *Of Mice and Men* are to the first edition, published in New York by Covici-Friede, 1937.

[3] Mark Van Doren, "Wrong Number," *The Nation,* CXLIV (March 6, 1937), p. 275.

[4] Joseph Wood Krutch, *The American Drama Since 1918* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 129.

[5] Stark Young, "Drama Critics Circle Award," *The New Republic,* XCIV (May 4, 1938), p. 396.

[6] Frank H. O'Hara, *Today in American Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 181.

fected by a sense of fate, and when it should be experienced as mechanical contrivance. Such a tool cannot be forged within the limits of this study; but it is possible to examine the particular circumstances of *Of Mice and Men* more closely than has been done in this connection.

Although the three motifs of symbol, action, and language build up a strong pattern of inevitability, the movement is not unbroken. About midway in the novel (chapters 3 & 4) there is set up a counter movement which seems to threaten the pattern. Up to this point the dream of "a house an' a couple of acres" has seemed impossible of realization; the motifs have been too insistent. But now it develops that George has an actual farm in mind (ten acres), knows the owners and why they want to sell it: " 'The ol' people that owns it is flat bust an' the ol' lady needs an operation.' " He even knows the price—" 'six hundred dollars' " (p. 104). Also, the maimed workman, Candy, is willing to buy a share in the dream with the three hundred dollars he has saved. It appears that at the end of the month George and Lennie will have another hundred dollars and that quite possibly they " 'could swing her for that.' " In the following chapter this dream and its possibilities are further explored through Lennie's visit with Crooks, the power of the dream manifesting itself in Crooks' conversion from cynicism to optimism. But at the very height of his conversion the mice symbol reappears in the form of Curley's wife, who threatens the dream by bringing with her the harsh realities of the outside world and by arousing Lennie's interest.

The function of Candy's and Crooks' interest and the sudden bringing of the dream within reasonable possibility is to interrupt, momentarily, the pattern of inevitability. But, and this is very important, Steinbeck handles this interruption so that it does not actually constitute a reversal of the situation. Rather, it insinuates a possibility. Thus, though working against the pattern set up by the motifs, this counter movement makes that pattern more aesthetically credible by creating the necessary ingredient of free will. The story achieves power through a delicate balance of the protagonists' free will and the force of circumstance.

In addition to imposing a sense of inevitability, this strong patterning of events performs the important function of extending the story's range of meanings. This can best be understood by reference to Hemingway's "fourth dimension," which has been defined by Joseph Warren Beach as an "aesthetic factor" achieved by the protagonists' repeated participation in some traditional "ritual or strategy," and by Malcolm Cowley as "the almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies" suggesting recurrent patterns of human experience. The incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language which inform

Of Mice and Men have precisely these effects. The simple story of two migrant workers' dream of a safe retreat, a "clean well-lighted place," becomes itself a pattern or archetype.

Thus while John Mason Brown calls the play "one of the finest, most pungent, and most poignant realistic productions,"[7] Frank H. O'Hara says that ". . . we are likely to come away with more . . . feelings for the implications of the story than the story itself . . . sketching behind the individual characters the vast numbers of other homeless drifters who work for a toe hold in a society which really has no place for them."[8] Carlos Baker sees the book as an allegory of Mind and Body.[9] Edmund Wilson calls the book "a parable which criticizes humanity from a non-political point of view."[10] The French critic, Mme. Claude-Edmonde Magny sees George and Lennie as "l'homme et le monstre," or "la conscience et l'humanité."[11]

As these remarks make clear, three levels have been observed in *Of Mice and Men.* There is the obvious story level on a realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also the level of social protest, Steinbeck the reformer crying out against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, its interpretation limited only by the ingenuity of the audience. It could be, as Carlos Baker suggests, an allegory of Mind and Body. Using the same kind of dichotomy, the story could also be about the dumb, clumsy, but strong mass of humanity and its shrewd manipulators. This would make the book a more abstract treatment of the two forces in *In Dubious Battle*—the mob and its leaders. The dichotomy could also be that of the unconscious and the conscious, the *id* and the *ego,* or any other forces or qualities which have the same structural relationship to each other as do Lennie and George. It is interesting in this connection that the name *Leonard* means "strong and brave as a lion," and that the name *George,* of course, means "husbandman."

The title itself, however, relates *Of Mice and Men* to still another level which is implicit in the context of Burns' poem:

> But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
> In proving foresight may be vain:
> The best laid schemes o' mice and men
> Gang aft a-gley
> An' leave us nought but grief an' pain
> For promis'd joy.

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[7] John Mason Brown, *Two On the Aisle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1938), p. 184.

[8] Frank H. O'Hara, loc. cit.

[9] Carlos Baker, "Steinbeck of California," *Delphian Quarterly,* XXIII (April, 1940), p. 42.

[10] Edmund Wilson, *The Boys In the Back Room* (San Francisco: Colt Press, 1941), p. 41.

[11] Claude-Edmonde Magny, *L'Age du roman américain* (Paris: Editions du Sueil, 1948), p. 182.

In the poem Burns extends the mouse's experience to include mankind; in *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human condition. "This is the way things are," both writers are saying. On this level, perhaps its most important, Steinbeck is dramatizing the non-teleological philosophy which had such a great part in shaping *In Dubious Battle* and which was to be explicated in *Sea of Cortez*. This level of meaning is also indicated by the book's tentative title while it was in progress—"Something That Happened." In this light, the ending of the story is, like the ploughman's disrupting of the mouse's nest, neither tragic nor brutal but simply a part of the pattern of events. It is amusing in this regard that a Hollywood director suggested to Steinbeck that someone else kill the girl so that sympathy could be kept with Lennie.

In addition to these meanings which grow out of the book's "pattern," there is what might be termed a subplot which defines George's concern with Lennie. It is easily perceived that George, the "husbandman," is necessary to Lennie; but it has not been pointed out that Lennie is just as necessary to George. Without an explanation of this latter relationship any allegory posited on the pattern created in *Of Mice and Men* must remain incomplete.

Repeatedly, George tells Lennie, "God, you're a lot of trouble. I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail" (p. 17). But this getting along so easy never means getting a farm of his own. With one important exception, George never mentions the dream except for Lennie's benefit. That his own "dream" is quite different from Lennie's is established early in the novel and often repeated: " 'God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An' I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whiskey, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool' " (p. 24). Lennie has heard this from George so often that in the last scene, when he realizes he has " 'done another bad thing,' " he asks, "Ain't you gonna give me hell? . . . Like, 'If I didn't have you I'd take my fifty bucks—' "

Almost every character in the story asks George why he goes around with Lennie: the foreman (p. 42), Curley (p. 48), Slim (pp. 64, 70-76), and Candy (p. 164). Crooks, the lonely Negro, doesn't ask but he does speculate about it, and shrewdly— " 'a guy talkin' to another guy and it don't make no difference if he don't hear or understand. The thing is, they're talkin' . . . ' " (p. 124). George's explanations vary from outright lies to a simple statement of " 'We travel to-

gether' " (p. 48). It is only to Slim, the superior workman with the "God-like eyes," that he tells a great part of the truth. Among other reasons, such as his feeling of responsibility for Lennie in return for the latter's unfailing loyalty, and their having grown up together, there is revealed another: " 'He's dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy. An' I ain't so bright neither, or I wouldn't be buckin' barley for my fifty and found. If I was even a little bit smart, I'd have my own place, an' I'd be bringin' in my own crops, 'sted of doin' all the work and not getting what comes up outa the ground' " (p. 71).

This statement, together with George's repeatedly expressed desire to take his fifty bucks to a cat house and his continual playing of solitaire, reveals that to some extent George needs Lennie as a rationalization for his failure. This is one of the reasons why, after the murder of Curley's wife, George refuses Candy's offer of a partnership which would have made the dream of a "safe place" a reality. The dream of the farm originates with Lennie; and it is only through Lennie, who also makes it impossible, that the dream has any meaning for George. An understanding of this dual relationship will do much to mitigate the frequent charge that Steinbeck's depiction of George's attachment is concocted of pure sentimentality. At the end of the novel, George's going off with Slim to "do the town" is more than an escape from grief. It is an ironic and symbolic twist to his dream.

The "real" meaning of the book is neither in the realistic action nor in the levels of allegory. Nor is it in some middle course. Rather, it is in the pattern which informs the story both on the realistic and allegorical levels, a pattern which Steinbeck took pains to prevent from becoming either trite or mechanical.

> I am man alive, and as long as I can, I intend to go on being man alive.
>
> For this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog.
>
> The novel is the one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book-tremulation can do.
>
> —D. H. Lawrence.