

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: an environmental perspective

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Introduction

It is common to develop a literary study focused on environment defining “natural conditions, eg land air and water, in which we live” (*Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, 2008). This is a study, as Beegel et al's title, *Steinbeck and the Environment* (1997), suggests, particularly concerning the relationship between environment and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, a six chapters novel about George and Lennie, two migrants recently enrolled as ranch hands on the periphery of Soledad in California. The story of this “double hero” (a term used to identify the two main characters always acting together in any circumstance) 1 is told through what they experience on the ranch with other workers while they are all fighting for a better life. My interest in this novel resides in its setting as the beginning of the first and last chapters focuses on the description of the ranch environment. It is a relevant aspect but critics often mention only a novel opening with a long description or its play form (Tian, 2012: 64; Yarmus, 1986: 154; Cox, 1975: 50; Fontenrose, 1962: 55-56; Rafroidi, 1962: 92). Jackson J. Benson gives no place to *Of Mice and Men* in his article drawing the importance of environment in John Steinbeck's fiction mostly based in the Californian great valley including Soledad (Benson, 1977). Thus, I am going to study the descriptive elements of its setting in order to show how the ranch and its people are dependent on environment to foresee equal opportunities for all irrespective of social classes. In so doing, I carry out my study through an environmental perspective² from the principle that “the place is a considerable part of the central meaning of the fiction” (Benson, 1977: 12). The central question is the following: what may be the explanation for the pre-eminence of environment in this novel's story-telling process? I try to answer this question all along my study with a look at the fictional relation which exists between

environment and the ranch on the one hand, and environment and the ranch hands on the other hand.

1- Environment and the ranch

A survey of the relationship between the ranch and its environment may result in different meanings. The one which is expected here should derive from the following question: How can the ranch trace the American reality through the description of the setting opening chapters one and six? The answer begins with the identification of the ranch and its environment in the novel before any appreciation.

A ranch is a “large farm, esp. [ecially] in the US or Canada where cattle are bred; similar farm producing crops, fruit, chicken, etc” or a “farm where certain other animals are bred” (*Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary*, 2008). In reference to this definition, the Curley family owns a horse ranch on the periphery of Soledad. Events reported in *Of Mice and Men* take place within that horse ranch. It consists of, just to consider what is visible in the story, the bunkhouse, the harness room, and the barn. If “the bunkhouse [where the ranch hands live] was a long, rectangular building” (19), the barn was not a small one as the narrator portrays it to open chapter five:

One end of the great barn was piled high with new hay and over the pile hung the four-taloned Jackson suspended from its pulley. The hay came down like a mountain slope to the’ other end of the barn, and there was a level place as yet unfilled with the new crop. At sides the feeding racks were visible, and between the slats the head of horses could be seen (*Of Mice and Men*, 93)

From the barn’s capacity, one can imagine different activities in and around it. A relatively important number of ranch hands is then required. So, apart from the employer’s family, employees make of this horse ranch a real life space. On the ranch, they are seen either in the bunkhouse or in the barn just. Living and working there, they plan to achieve their dreams.

In waiting for the achievement of some workers’ dreams to possess their own ranch one day, the Curley ranch already exists. Though it is a fully-fledged entity, it exists somewhere in the fictional context of *Of Mice and Men*. That somewhere can be identified. One just has to read carefully the notes below to draw its portrait:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and run deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with

trees-willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark. (*Of Mice and Men*, 1)

These notes are the first paragraph of the long description opening chapter one. "Like a long camera panning, the opening scene traces the Salinas River" with as more details as possible (Tian, 2012: 64-65). The result for the reader is a kind of "sounding picture" as words used unveil the space along the Salinas River where the ranch is located. In addition to the Salinas River having given its name to the town where John Steinbeck was born, each word is in its place by naming elements making the scene. It is a considerable contribution to its interpretation. Soledad, for instance, symbolizes California, as its Spanish sound name, meaning "loneliness," reveals its history going from the Mexican War³. Of course, this name bears significance since the ranch almost forms a one-property district separated from the town. People working there deeply feel that solitude and George expresses it: "Guys like us that work on ranches are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family [...]" (*Of Mice and Men*, 15). Because of this feeling, "setting *Of Mice and Men* in Soledad is appropriate" (McMurray, 2004: 106). Also, the ranch looks isolated in an area limited by rocky Gabilan Mountains and a long valley, not to mention John Steinbeck's collection of short stories (*The Long Valley*). It is part of the Steinbeck Country as Martha Heasley Cox's article and its illustrative map show it in her attempt to underline "Steinbeck's romantic attachment to his country and its people" (Cox, 1975: 41). Following Cox's steps, Paul McCarthy provides the readers with the limits of John Steinbeck's fictional territory which is not too different from the actual one:

[...] the Steinbeck territory covers thousands of square miles in Central California, particularly in the Long Valley, which extends South of Salinas, Steinbeck's hometown, for over one hundred miles and lies between the Gabilan Mountains on the east and the Santa Lucia Mountains along the coast as well as towns and villages scattered over a wide area, including Monterey and Pacific Grove, Northwest of Salinas and overlooking the bay; Watsonville near the Santa Cruz Mountains; Salinas itself; and , South in the

Valley, Soledad, King City, and Jolon. East of the Valley and the Gabilan Mountains, but still within the territory, lies the San Joaquin Valley [...] (Mc Carthy, 1980: 24)

From this sentenced map of John Steinbeck's fictional world which reflects the real California including his homeland, Salinas, anyone can realize his regionalist dimension. Of course, John Steinbeck is far to reproduce simply a part of his land in fiction. His devotion to realism does not sacrifice art. Having a glance at what is "on the valley side," to continue with the comment on the description opening chapter one, the reader's attention is caught by the beautiful picture of a living place where existing elements peacefully achieve their own destiny. They are well painted with a particular faithfulness to their natural expression. The ecosystem seems to be complete from elements related to the river (water, sand bank), to those related to the flora (trees, sycamores, bush, leaves), and others related to the fauna (rabbits, dogs, deer). Thanks to the novelist's mastery of description art, they harmoniously compose together and create an almost virgin natural milieu. This should mean equal opportunities for all those who may be in touch with it in their search of happiness. One can remember early America when pioneers arriving there encountered a wild place after its discovery by Christopher Columbus and they fought as they could until they changed the wild place into modern cities. After the description of the scene, the story in *Of Mice and Men* starts with two migrants who are going to work on a ranch. Are they going to change their life? This question is answered in the next point dealing with the relationship between environment and the ranch hands. For sure, the beginning of their adventure is similar in its form to that of pioneers in early America.

It is interesting to notice that the narrator imagines a kind of embodiment of environment in the double hero⁴ when the latter decides to spend a night by the river before shifting to the ranch:

For a moment Lennie lay quiet, and then he said hopefully, "We gonna work on a ranch, George"

"A wright. You got that. But we're gonna sleep here because I got a reason." The day was going fast now. Only the tops of the Gabilan mountains flamed with the light of the sun that had gone from the valley. A water snake slipped along on the pool, its head held up like a little periscope. The reeds jerked slightly in current. Far off toward the highway a man shouted something, and another man shouted back. The sycamore limbs rustled under a little wind that died immediately (*Of Mice and Men*, 8)

The reason to sleep there is not a superficial one. It is recommended by the necessity to be one with the natural environment by spending a night there. The narrator's evocation of the time going on in the environment by the river defines the ritual which maintains the image of that land in their mind. From this embodiment process, the images of Gabilan mountains, the valley, and the sycamore, for example, will always stay in them wherever they may be. It is an attachment to that place so they cannot be lost even when they are fired from a ranch⁵. Their hope derives from it and "it is part of the American dream" (Fontenrose, 1962: 59) which motivates any American citizen be him a migrant worker or not, white or non white, man or woman.

The description of the environment locating the ranch produces a lasting effect in the reader's mind. This effect wanted by the narrator suggests the ranch's dependence on its environment. The evolution of events from chapter two to chapter five does not break the narrator's will to let the reader guess it. Chapter six, the last one, opens with the description of the ranch environment:

The deep green pool of the Salinas River was still in the late afternoon. Already the sun had left the valley to go climbing up the slopes of the Gabilan Mountains, and the hilltops were rosy in the sun. But by the pool among the mottled sycamores, a pleasant shade had fallen.

A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically. (*Of Mice and Men*, 110)

The chapter has changed but the scene has not: the Salinas River, the valley, the Gabilan Mountains, and the Sycamores are still there. In fact, chapter six is the continuity of chapter one. The other chapters (from two to five) are devoted to events taking place on the ranch (the bunkhouse and the barn). As the ranch is isolated within that environment, the narrator brings it out to create a fictional land of opportunities. By the way, the narrator keeps on describing the space along the Salinas River to stress its uniqueness for events making the story. It can be regarded as a sample of the American society where the achievement of happiness should be possible for everybody according to its strong democratic foundation. The pursuit of happiness is one of basic human rights specified by *The Declaration of Independence* in its preamble (apud Wood et al, 1975: 202). People must enjoy the fruit of their work unless they cross hands and look passively. If such is not the case, it is an injustice to be denounced and the writer can help for that.

In reality, the relationship between the ranch and its environment excludes the existence of distinct places for the setting. Even if characters are acting by the river (Chapter one and six), in the bunkhouse (Chapter two and three), and finally in the barn (Chapter four and five), it is obvious that “the setting includes just three places all in the Salinas Valley” (Tian, 2012: 63). To consider the play form of *Of Mice and Men*, the valley materializes the unity of place, an aspect of classical theater.⁶ Its fictional treatment illustrates John Steinbeck’s attachment to his homeland. The ranch being located in that valley is representative of an American reality since John Steinbeck “experienced in his own life what he was writing” (Gaither, 62-63). It is a microcosm of the American society.

2- Environment and the ranch hands

The relationship between environment and ranch hands is observable in *Of Mice and Men*. In this novel, “Steinbeck basically reports something that happened on a ranch” (Hart, 2004: 34). Nothing could have happened without people living and working there. The dependence of the ranch on its environment determines the personality of the ranch hands identified among the ranch people.

Characters in *Of Mice and Men* only exist on a ranch which itself exists on the periphery of Soledad. This relation of dependence is understandable through the story-telling process. In fact the story is told in the way that from the beginning there is a focus on the ranch environment. Its description precedes any human presence which begins with the appearance of George and Lennie walking by the river to join the ranch: “For a moment the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the north and came into the opening by the green pool. They had walked in single file down the north [...]” (*Of Mice and Men*, 2).

The use of the verb “emerged” is not hazardous. “To emerge” meaning “come out or up” or “come into view or prominent” (*Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary*, 2008) supposes that something or someone non visible becomes visible. The two emerging men are George and Lennie. The sequence of their appearance following the description of environment can be compared with the creation process in the Bible. After creating the earth, the heaven and everything they contain, “The time came when the Lord God formed the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And man became a living person” (Genesis 2:7). When “man” becomes “a living person” (Adam) the creation process does not stop since he is followed by his helper, Eve. In the same way George appears first and he is then followed by Lennie as they walk “in single file”. Be it an appearance or a creation, the human being originates from the

wild nature. It is recalled in the closing chapter written in the same rhythm as the opening one: "Suddenly Lennie appeared out of the brush, and he came as silently as a creeping bear moves." (*Of Mice and Men*, 110).

Human life starts with two persons in the Bible as well as human presence starts with two persons, too, in *Of Mice and Men*. Like in Eden, the symbolism of the number two is respected in the valley except the difference of sex. The two male characters playing main roles in *Of Mice and Men* motivate some critical studies focused on the interdependent bond close to homosexuality between George and Lennie as did Leland S. Person (1995; 2004). Yet, for John J. Han, *Of Mice and Men* is simply "a novella on male friendship" (2004: 25). Indeed they are both men but they are two persons at the beginning of a story which is centered on them. Anyway, one should notice that no life is possible out of human dependence on environment

The story-telling process begins with the description of the environment and keeps on with George and Lennie joining the ranch where they are finally enrolled as workers. They then complete the list of the ranch people who are of two kinds: the ranch owners and the ranch hands. The ranch owners' family consists of Curley the father and Curley the son with his wife. In the story, the name Curley is only used for the son while his father owning the ranch is called the boss. The proper name of Curley's wife is unknown. The father is really the boss and his dressing proves it:

A little stocky man stood in the open doorway. He wore blue jean trousers, a flannel shirt, a black, unbuttoned vest a vest a stuck in his belt, on each side of a square steel buckle. On his head was a soiled brown Stetson hat, and he wore high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man (*Of Mice and Men*, 22).

The boss's dressing is a particular one but the most distinctive thing in it is his pair of boots and Curley wearing it, too, is assimilated to him: "[...] a thin young man with a brown face, with brown eyes and a head of tightly curled hair. He wore a work glove on his left hand, and, like the boss, he wore high-heeled boots" (*Of Mice and Men*, 27). The narrator draws the reader's attention on the "high-heeled boots" because of their high form and their high quality so as to conclude on the social classification of the ranch people. The high form denotes the high position of the Curley on the ranch while the high quality denotes the high cost which is not affordable to ranch workers. All this justifies the opposition between the high class or the class of rich with the ranch owners (the boss and company), and the low class or the class of poor with the ranch hands.

As the Curley are known, it is necessary to say a few about the ranch hands. There are, to mention some of them, George, Lennie, Candy, Crooks, Whithey, Smitty, and Slim.

What they have in common is their status of people engaged in painful tasks for a rich family's ranch. They are then regarded under their condition of "laboring men." In fact the representation of the place where they live reflects their image of the lowest people of the ranch. The place in question is a bunk house. One can look at its internal part:

Inside the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets and the other three showing their burlap ticking. Over each bunk there was nailed an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves for the loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. And there were medicines on the shelves, and little vials, combs: and from nails on the box sides, a few neckties. Near one wall there was a black cast-iron stove, its stovepipe going straight up through the ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on (*Of Mice and Men*, 19)

The description of the bunkhouse from inside defines the personality of its occupants. It is that of submissive persons condemned to do what justifies their presence on the ranch. Taking care of horses, they are themselves placed in conditions similar to that of animals. All details put together not only reveal their poor living conditions but also refer to what help them be ready for their job. In addition to George and Lennie the "new men" (*Of Mice and Men*, 21), the old ranch hands are introduced by their name and their job title: Candy the old Swamper, Crooks the stable buck, Whithey the blacksmith, Smitty the little skinner, Slim the tall skinner. In their roles, they are called either by the proper name or by their job title or by both. With such an identification owing much to a low paid and non permanent job, the ranch hands' vulnerability is no longer unquestionable. It is clear that "[...] They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their toil on some other ranch [...]" (*Of Mice and Men*, 15)" George and Lennie, the double hero, are aware of their poor situation of migrant workers in accordance with the dream they have. George clearly voices it:

"O.K. 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 –"
[...] "We'll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll

build a fire in the stove and set around it an' listen to the rain comin' down on the roof—Nuts ”(*Of Mice and Men*, 16)

These are George's words voicing the dream. He uses the pronoun “we” to mean that it is a common dream with Lennie, in other words, the double hero's dream. They expect to possess a farm and live peacefully. But that dream is still a dream. Their current situation has not yet changed.

If George and Lennie are known to be vulnerable, the other workers are not better than them. Individual situations can be observed to realize it. To begin with Candy, a question comes in mind: why is he called more by Old Swamper, Old Candy, or Old man than by his proper name without the adjective “old”? The answer is to be found in what makes him visible on the ranch from the day he enters in the bunk house to meet George and Lennie for the first time: “The door opened and a tall, stoop-shouldered old man came in. He was dressed in blue jeans and he carried a big push-broom in his left hand.” (*Of Mice and Men*, 10). His old age and his everyday broom in hand are essential to picture him. But they are not sufficient because an old dog always next to him. The narrator reports a sequence:

The old man came slowly into the room. He had his broom in his hand. And at his heels there walked a dragfooted sheep dog, gray of muzzle, and with pale, blind old eyes. The dogs struggled lamely to the side of the room and lay down, grunting softly to himself and licking his grizzled, moth-eaten coat. The swamper watched him, until he was settled. (*Of Mice and Men*, 26)

Candy expresses much consideration for his dog as if it were a human being. That dog pictured in a pitiful state reflects the portrait of its master. This is a situation in which, to quote John Steinbeck from a non fiction book, “a man and a dog become the same in appearance” (*America and Americans*, 1966: 16) In reference to Candy being a stand-in as a swamper and an old man identified with his dying dog, Brian Leany Doyle may be right saying that “he is useless except as a janitor for the bunk house for which he may soon be evicted without means of support” (Doyle, 2006: 84). Consequently, Candy is not less vulnerable than others.

Like Candy and other ranch hands, Crooks is subject to the Curley. But he lives separately from his ranch mates. This is not a special treatment. Racial or ethnic reasons explain it: “Crooks [is] the negro stable buck” (*Of Mice and Men*, 72). Here is introduced the only black of the ranch. The three details introducing him interact to trace his people's sufferings from slavery to the present. Even if the term “negro” means his particular identity as African American, it also announces his

marginalization among whites ranch community. Beside, his ranch mates sometimes use its pejorative form “nigger”:

“[...] Ya see the stable buck’s nigger.”

“Nigger, huh?”

“Yeah. Nice fella too. Got a crooked back where a horse kicked him [...].”

(*Of Mice and Men*, 72).

Being called “nigger” and working flat out, “he somewhat resembles the former slaves” (Loumbouzi, 2010: 105). From this conversation, it is finally explained the origin of his name “Crooks”. As it is due to his job as the stable buck of the horse ranch, he has been suffering for long to survive from his fragile situation among whites. The separated bunk he lives in also reinforces his vulnerability:

[He] had his bunk in the harness room; a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn. On one side of the little room there was a square four-paned window, and on the other, a narrow plank door leading into the barn Crook’s bank was a long box filled with straw, on which his blankets were flung. On the wall by the window there were pegs on which hung broken harness in process of being mended; strips of new leather; and under the window itself a little bench for leather-working tools, curved knives and needles and balls of linen thread, and a small hand riveter. (*Of Mice and Men*, 72)

It is really a “tiny room: not only does it look the enlargement of horses’ space but it also seems to be a box room” (Loumbouzi, 2010: 170). So Crooks’ situation is understandable by his conditions which are not better than those of horses he is working for. It “is a result of the economic system of slavery resulting from ignorance and warped attitudes [of the boss and the other workers]” (Hart, 2004:39). He is victimized by social conditions and racial prejudice.

As for Slim, another ranch hand, one needs only to read the following lines:

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. He was capable of killing a fly on the wheeler’s butt with a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. This was Slim, the jerkline skinner. His hatched face was ageless. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. (*Of Mice and Men*, 36)

The narrator portrays Slim as a beast of burden. He is a hard working man feared by his house mates who even call him “Big tall skinner” (*Of Mice and Men*, 25) to

recognize his exceptional qualities as a skinner and his incomparable strength. Out of his job which is, unfortunately, very lowly paid, he represents nothing for the Curley. Thus his situation is not better than vulnerable.

Instead of saying a lot about all ranch hands, their fragile situation due to the Curley injustice is to understand from the following sequence: “The old man sat down on another box. “Don’t tell Curley I said none of this. He’d slough me. He just don’t give a damn. Won’t ever get canned ’cause his old man’s the boss” “(*Of Mice and Men*, 36). The fear of the ranch owners is visible because they can decide to fire one of the ranch hands without justification and at any time. For the latter, there is no guarantee to preserve their job. Anyway “A guy on a ranch don’t never listen nor he don’t ast no questions” (*Of Mice and Men*, 27). From their vulnerability, ranch hands are in the margin of the American dream, which is “the ideal of freedom equality and opportunity traditionally held to be available to every American” (*Cambridge Dictionary of American English*, 2000).

The short presentation of some of the ranch hands is sufficient to illustrate their vulnerability which places them among the class of poor in the Californian society as represented by the Curley ranch. They originate from a land of opportunity but it is not profitable to them because of social discrimination.

Conclusion

One of the most striking aspects of *Of Mice and Men* is its chapter one beginning with a long description of the setting. There is no doubt that chapter six presents the same characteristic. In this way, the closing chapter (chapter six) is the sequel to the opening one (chapter one). Both chapters finally make one to confirm the unity of place, as in classical theater, for all events told in the novel also assimilated to a play. To consider that place, the valley locating the ranch, environment is brought out as a relevant part in the story-telling process. The relationship between environment and *Of Mice and Men* derives in the re-creation of a part of California with the Gabilan Mountains, the Salinas River, the valley, and its people in a permanent search for happiness. The meticulous and, sometime, poetic description of such an environment without redundancy, makes of this novel a celebration of California. This quality cannot be denied by the vulnerable situation of white and black ranch hands victimized by social discrimination due to ranch owners. It is not a fictional invention because “Steinbeck was a product of his time, and intellectual influences on him [...] were multiple” (Han, 2004: 27). In fact, the novelist’s part of realism must be recognized as he himself

experienced life with many people suffering because of human injustice. Praising California through its environment is a way for him to show that the wild nature symbolizes life which must be for everyone a gift to use at his convenience to achieve success, but some people prevent others from reaching that goal since society is divided into two classes: the class of rich or powerful people and the class of poor or weak people. Praising California is also an opportunity for him to express his compassion toward vulnerable people by devoting his art to them. Thus any form of discrimination against human being irrespective of race or ethnic group can stop.

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1 It is evident in the story that the main roles are played by George and Lennie, two different characters, who always act together in all situations they are involved in by the river and on the ranch. They behave more than like twins even if at the end George kills Lennie.

2 I could have spoken of ecological perspective to mean the same thing knowing that there is a tendency to speak of ecocriticism.

3 The Mexican War (1846-1848) was an armed conflict which opposed America to Mexico, a former Spanish colony until 1821. As a consequence of her victory, America got more space to form her current far west territory with states such as California, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico.

4 As I already explained it in the introduction, this term is used to identify the two main characters, George and Lennie, always acting together in any circumstance in the story. 5 Before shifting to Soledad, the double hero comes from Weed in the north of Soledad where they were already fired from a ranch.

6 In reference to "the unities of time, place, and action, first proposed by Aristotle and expanded by Lodovico Castelvetro and then by the French neoclassists" (Tian, 2012: 63-64)

In matters of principles of drama more could have been said as in writing *Of Mice and Men* is, to quote John Steinbeck himself cited by Junwu Tian, his "idea was to write a play in the form of a novel" (Tian, 2012: 56) .