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The portrayal of African American Image in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Abstract:

*The paper aims to explore, identify, analyze and discuss the portrayal of African American Image in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The analysis is made doing in-depth study of theories related to race and racism, and detailed review of 'Of Mice and Men' and other similar literary pieces by John Steinbeck. The perception of race is one of the most thought-provoking themes to write about when discussing and analyzing American literature. It is also a topic that is recurring in the academic field. Why are scholars so interested in writing about how Americans have perceived race throughout their history as a people? Is it merely because it is peculiar and unlike how it has been perceived elsewhere? Is it because they believe there is a moral argument to be made? Some righteous, rectitudinous lessons to be learned and taught in order never to reproduce past horrors? To sum things up, the study has tried to answer questions related to race and racism in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in particular, and in African American Literature in general.*

Keywords:

Racism, Race, African-American, Righteous, Rectitudinous

Introduction:

While those are certainly fine motivations for conducting research and writing papers, one has to acknowledge that the racial component often inherent in American Literature fascinates a literature scholar the way a virus fascinates a virologist. The perception of race in American literature is indeed comparable to a living organism for it hatches from a particular place at a particular time, then perseveres in morphing or evolving with the events it endures or the individuals it contaminates. Consequently, analyzing and writing about racial perception in some American piece of literature is never dull nor redundant; it is an endeavor that never fails to deliver a colorful case to be solved.

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John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. (February 1902 to December 1968), both Nobel and Pulitzer laureate and notorious for works such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath*(1939), *The Pearl* (1947)and *East of Eden*(1952) is an American author best praised (and sometimes criticized) for relentlessly tackling themes relating to the alienation, labor, loneliness, belonging, friendship, desire, dreams, the American Dream and more specifically the misery resulting from either the presence or absence of those components. Although Steinbeck did not focus on racism and racial perception in his short stories and numerous novels, he dealt with the topic in a vivid way, however succinct. He suffered from segregation and bigotry that came in the form of comments and inquisitions about his ethnic, religious, and political belonging and affinity. This helps us, as scholars, better realize he approached the theme of segregation not merely as a spectator, but as an actor; not only did he witness racism around him, he experienced it first hand and fell victim to it.

In his frequently censored (mainly for blunt language and the use of racist slang) novella, *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937 and which achieved success both critically and commercially, Steinbeck paints an impressively trenchant image of racial segregation towards African Americans. This image, although powerful, comes obscured by layers of the major themes erecting the novella, thus, inviting the scholar to dig deeper and read between the lines in order to unearth the whole vision of the author.

Of Mice and Men takes place in the vicinity of Soledad, California. It begins near the Salinas River, where migrant workers George Milton and Lennie Small have been left by “that bastard bus driver” some four miles away from the Ranch they are headed to for a new job as farmworkers. George and Lennie have been traveling together for a while, going from farm to farm to make the money they both need to fulfill their common dream: to have a place of their own where they would live free, cultivate their own land, harvest their own crops, “An’ live off the fatta the lan’” as George reiterates throughout the story. This journey leads them through events and characters that will ultimately disrupt their plans. One of these characters goes by the nickname of Crooks; an African American stable buck at the ranch they recently joined.

This short essay is directed at analyzing the racial component in *Of Mice and Men*. More accurately, it aspires to explain how the character of Crooks in the novella suffers from a racism, decidedly and unashamedly ordinary. This novella -set in a land where slavery had been abolished for

more than seventy-five years, where this so-called abolition¹ supposedly brought the American people closer to their dream of constituting a nation where all Americans would enjoy equality- depicts how racial segregation was still very much vigorous in California amid the Great Depression.

The Story of Crooks is a frame story, in other words, a story within a story. The reader first perceives Crooks as he is seen and treated by other characters in the novella. Before long, the latter gets a chance at better displaying his persona through one of the scenes transpiring in his dwelling.

Crooks is a secondary character in this novella and only appears twice. However, Steinbeck establishes him as a bedrock to discuss racial segregation and portray the racial perception of the 1930s, as he is mentioned on several occasions during the interactions taking place between the different characters.

This paper will study how the character of Crooks is portrayed by John Steinbeck, first through the other characters who see him as a colored man primarily, through the lifelike and expressive description of his quarters and finally in his own words while telling his story to Lennie Small. The realism with which Steinbeck illustrates his characters and the fact that Crooks is the only African American individual in this narrative make the latter a somehow accurate display of the sinister repercussions of racial segregation in the 1930s.

The structure of the novella is built around six chapters that could easily be compared to acts of a drama as explained by Cynthia Burkhead “The plot structure of *Of Mice and Men* reflects Steinbeck’s intention of writing a novel that could be played on stage without extensive adaptation.” (Student Companion to John Steinbeck, 2002, p.57). The story begins near the Salinas River, unfolds in different locations of the ranch and wraps up back where it began.

One brilliant aspect of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is its narration. The author craftily uses a third-person semi-omniscient narrator; he seems to know what, when and where events are taking place, who they involve and describes characters, their actions and reactions with conviction. On the other hand, this narrator appears to have no knowledge of whatever is materializing in the characters’ minds. Instead, the reader’s judgment comes from the narrator’s description of the characters and their actions, which

¹ Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America:

Amendment 13 - Slavery Abolished. Ratified 12/6/1865.

Amendment 14 - Citizenship Rights. Ratified 7/9/1868.

Amendment 15 - Race No Bar to Vote. Ratified 2/3/1870.

oftentimes leaves the doors to interpretation open. For example, George answers “coldly” and lays his cards down “playfully”. Lennie “hopelessly” stares at his hands or “helplessly” looks to George for instructions. Candy, the swamper in the ranch, moves “slowly” and looks “cautiously” at the door before speaking, making sure no one is listening. Curley, the ranch owner’s son, “gingerly” nears Lennie and stares at him “levelly”. The narrator leaves some hints here and there about how individuals feel or conduct certain actions without ever fixing the limits of interpretation. Some characters are wordy and much has to be distilled from what they have to say in the many dialogues and rare monologues.

This seemingly deliberate lackluster character development offers a less traditional narration that nevertheless shows the intention of the author not to trap the reader into a linear way of thinking that would forcefully prompt an obvious interpretation, thus resulting in a clear-cut conclusion.

Crooks in the eyes of the other:

Crooks is first mentioned in chapter 2 of the story by Candy, the swamper, in such words: “Sure. Ya see the stable buck’s a nigger”, followed up by “Yeah. Nice fella too”, showing how banal and common racism was. The African American character will be referred to in this fashion and with that exact word a total of 16 times in 187 pages. From beginning to end, Crooks is referred to either by his skin color or by his occupation. This demonstrates how African Americans were objectified and dehumanized; other characters seem to only consider him as a stable buck who happens to be black. There is simply nothing more they see in him than that. They will only interact with him either concerning his work or to downplay and abuse him. When Crooks makes his first appearance in Chapter 3, it is only to report to Slim, the skinner – and “prince of the ranch”² in the author’s words – that he had done what was asked of him: “You told me to warm up tar for that mule’s foot. I got it warm”. In this same dialogue, Crooks, without being asked to, informs

² Cynthia Burkhead: “Slim, while also representing a type, that of the wise man, is presented in more detail, or more roundly, than the other minor characters. He is important because he’s the voice of the author.”

“Because of the description Steinbeck gives Slim, the reader is compelled to accept his observations and philosophies. He is both physically godlike, a more expert jerkline skinner than any other, and spiritually godlike; Slim is ageless and omnipotent. He knows why people live and act the way they do, but his knowledge has not made him sour; he is a kind man. What he sees is what Steinbeck would like the reader to see.” (Student Companion to John Steinbeck, 2002, p.67)

Slim that Lennie is in the barn doing something he is not supposed to be doing; Crooks not only tries to communicate with other characters, he means to prove useful. Crooks's first interaction portrays a tool rather than an individual who acts on his free will. He does not question, does not discuss, exhibits neither opinion no emotion; he simply serves. Moreover, the title of mister or "Mr." is only to be found thrice in the whole novella and is twice used by Crooksto address Slim; a white healthy male respected by all. This brings, for the first time, a notion of power-relation between crooks and another character. Although Slim does not particularly mistreat Crooks, he is portrayed as superior to him in every aspect.

This serves as a replica of American society during the great depression where colored Americans were relegated to a position of inferiority and unimportance. Moreover, it stresses just how unwanted colored individuals were near white folks. They are not to roam freely at risk of offending society which could end in lynching³ as it happened on several occasions⁴ between 1865 and 1964

Chapter 4 is thoroughly dedicated to Crooks's character development as it is set in his dwelling where he connects with Lennie, Candy and Curley's wife. It is important to indicate that the choice of these three characters is plausibly not random; indeed, all three individuals can be seen as foil characters to the stable buck in the sense that on one hand, they all share a somewhat comparable suffering in the form of loneliness, worthlessness and ostracism,while on the other hand, a major factor differentiates them from him for, unlike Crooks, they are white.

While Lennie is mentally crippled, Candy and Curley's wife are respectively physically and socially so. Lennie endures the previously mentioned torments for not being on the same intellectual ground as other characters. He is described by some of them as a "big baby", which, if it appears rather unharmed at first glance, proves to be insulting when used to point at his inability to comprehend situations and act accordingly to what of him. He shares Crooks's undesirableness in society. Candy is an amputee in addition to being decrepit and thus, is faced with worthlessness as he

³ Act of punishing an individual by a group of people, resulting in the execution of the individual.

The phenomenon has on several occasions been portrayed in American literature in the form of short stories such as William Faulkner's "Dry September" (1931) and John Steinbeck's "The Vigilante" (1936) and novels like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) among other genres.

⁴<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>

mentions his fear of being “canned”; just as for Crooks, he is less useful than others for being a cripple. Curley’s wife is a woman in a society where females are considered inferior to males. Her so-called inferiority is accentuated by the fact that she is the only woman in a ranch full of men and thus is rejected by most and -as is the case for Crooks- discredited and belittled.

Near the end of Chapter 4, Curley’s wife starts abusing the other three characters, referring to Crooks with the n-word, to which he responds by retiring into the “terrible protective dignity of the Negro”. The narrator puts it in a way that insinuates that it is not a surprising reaction, nor is it exceptional in any way. When Crooks finally confronts her, reminding her that she has “no right to be in a colored man’s room”⁵, She responds destructively “Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung upon a tree so easy it ain’t even funny”. Beyond her heinous threat and the racist language that formulates it, one thing that is worth noting is that during this violent altercation, which seems to last uneasily longer once the reader notices that Crooks is not even fighting back, neither Lennie nor Candy seem to react until she is done burying the stable buck alive. As mentioned earlier, the n-word which is profusely used in this chapter is for the very first time in the middle of a sentence, capitalized and thus, stressed. It is its first and only unequivocal use as an insult.

In addition to all those afflictions, Crooks has to bear the cross of being black at a day and age where blacks are destined for a subpar life. His environment is so consistent at holding it to his face that he does not seem to fight it.

First-person Crooks:

The tragedy of Crooks does not solely come from how he is perceived by others but also from how he feels about being who he is: a colored man. His skin color and the repercussions it brings down on him make him perform in a bitter and mean way. He seems to take pleasure in tormenting Lennie about George possibly not returning for him or being dead in Chapter 4. He “pressed forward some kind of private victory” when he implies that George

⁵ Jim Crow Laws: A set of laws, the first of which came into effect in 1876, passed in order to make racial segregation legal.

Some of these laws included separate living areas, separate schooling, separate transportation, separate leisure facilities and no interracial marriages for colored Americans.

It will take nearly a hundred years for segregation to become officially illegal when president Lyndon.B Johnson signed the civil rights act in 1964.

will abandon Lennie. “Crooks’s face lighted with pleasure in his torture” as he keeps on “calmly” persecuting Lennie. Despite clearly highlighting the buck’s wickedness, those lines might also suggest that he is being intoxicated, corrupted by a power he as a black man, rarely gets to hold; as a victim, he used to be on one other hand of the stick and now, he can finally experience what it feels like to be on the other hand of it. The delight quickly fades away, replaced by shame, when he finally quits hurting Lennie and “gently” says that this latter has got George who will come back for him.

Crooks also displays his fatalism, resignation and despair with Lennie when sharing his story. When asked why he lived in a separate abode from all the others, he simply and lucidly replies “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.”. It is worth noting the repetition of the words “they”, “black” and “you”; as it suggests that Crooks is constantly reminded of his skin color. That it is not something he could forget or just ignore. “They” and “you” are possibly repeated to make the distinction between himself and the other. He is black while they are white.

When he tells Lennie “You got no right to come in my room. This here’s my room. Nobody got any right in here but me”, it first creates an image of hostility and inhospitality that could easily be interpreted as him naturally mirroring the rejection he is faced with when approaching white people and the fact that they do not recognize his right to be with them. However, it becomes clear that his reaction is nothing more but a defense mechanism built with bricks of loneliness and alienation when he allows Lennie in his room in a “little more friendly” tone and follows up talking and eventually opening up to him.

Crook’s previously mentioned fatalism emerges clearly when, after reminiscing about how his father didn’t like him playing with white kids, he says: “I never knew till long later why he didn’t like that. But I know now”. This line implies things have always been and will remain the way they are for Crooks; black people are simply supposed to be perceived as inferior by white people. The expression “long later” suggests two ideas; first, that a prolonged period did not bring any change to the situation he is now in. Secondly, that it took him long to finally understand and accept that no change was to be expected or in other words, that he did try to see things differently but failed to do so at the end.

By saying “S’pose you couldn’t go into the bunk house and play rummy ‘cause you was black. How’d you like that? S’pose you had to sit out here an’ read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain’t no good. A guy needs somebody – to be near

him”, Crooks confesses his resignation to being lonely; he is lonely because he’s black, and that is his reality. He can have books, he can pretend to mingle with white people from time to time, but he is prisoner to his skin color that shackles him out of reach from being somebody who has someone in a ranch with only white people to be found.

Finally, Crooks is utterly desperate, unable to comprehend and accept the idea of an American dream where Man holds some truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness⁶. He shows this by being scornful at Lennie’s idea of owning, together with George, a land where they would do as they please. Crooks declares “I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them”, showing how ridiculous the idea that someone can own land -which represents salvation and freedom to Lennie and George- is to him. He repeats “I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land” as to acknowledge that his life does not permit him to believe in a genuine Good. First, Crooks supports his argument with the fact that he has read books telling him otherwise. This is a powerful allusion to the inferiority he is confined in; the only way a black man would experience or learn about owning land and going to heaven would be in books, as any other means or ways are barred to him. Secondly, that he compares owning land to heaven shows both how far it is from his reality and how incredulous and unrealistic such an endeavor would be.

Throughout the dialogues in Chapter 4, first with Lennie, then with Candy, Crooks reiterates on several occasions that no one is getting any land. “I seen it happen too many times. I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand.”, “I never seen a guy really do it.”, “You guys is just kiddin’ yourself.”, “Seems like ever’ guy got land on his head.”. While this apparently stresses his disbelief in such an idea, the element of repetition may imply that he is obsessed with it; as if deep down he dreams of it and he is only rehashing how illusory it is to him, again and again in order not to be one who dreams.

⁶The unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America (July 4, 1776)
<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.html>

Crooks as perceived by the narrator:

Crooks' first appearance in the novella in chapter 3 comes along with the first words the narrator dedicates to him. He is referred to as the stable buck and after quietly opening a door, he puts in his head, "a lean negro head, lined with pain, the eyes patient", to address Slim. We have to consider that the use of the word "negro", although not used anymore nowadays, had a significantly milder connotation than the n-word and is not to be considered a synonym in texts written before the second half of the 20th century. For example, both expressions are used by the author in this novella and there is quite a clear distinction between the two of them from how they are used; "negro" is only used four times in the text, three of which by the narrator. The n-word, which is used more often, does not even once come from the narrator, and is almost exclusively derogatory.

Crooks' direct mention and description by the narrator is exceptional. Indeed, Steinbeck chose to develop this persona differently from how he did the other characters; Through the narrator, we learn more from Crooks via the description of his abode and the use of symbolism. This indirect approach further highlights Crooks' dehumanization; he is openly objectified, related to things than he is to people.

Crooks' bunk is in the harness room; a little shed that leans off the wall of the barn. Here the character is first dehumanized by pointing out that his home is nothing more than a harness room, an area where items utilized for tending the horses are stored. There is little to no difference between him and objects. He is simply kept in a storage space the way goods are. His berth being a "little" shed, clearly shows how little prestige and importance he has in and to his environment. Moreover, the fact that it is situated "off the wall of the barn" entails how marginalized he is; separated from the barn and animals the way he is from society and white people.

The narrator follows up by giving a vivid and abundant description of all the items scattered all over the area, most of which are utensils. This definitively objectifies Crooks; he is just one of the many tools he shares his space with. In his apple box over his bunk, was a range of medicine bottles, "both for himself and for the horses"; again, blurring the lines that separate him from a lesser being.

It is stated that since he was alone, a stable buck and a cripple, Crooks was more "permanent" than the other men and thus, had accumulated more "possessions than he could carry on his back". This proves to be yet another passage supercharged with symbolism. If being a stable buck and a cripple made him permanent, this does not mean in any case that he was considered as useful. Furthermore, his permanence, instead of projecting a certain safety,

implies a sense of continuity and lingering of his unfortunate state; while the other itinerant workers were there for a set period, Crooks was to remain for an indefinite time in his lower-end quarters and the condition those latter offer and impose on him. The too-many possessions he accumulated are a symbol of the stigmata that have come to stick to him over the years; there are way too many prejudices and injuries done to him that shall -despite his possible efforts-leave indelible marks on his body and soul.

Among Crooks' personal belongings were books; a tattered dictionary and a "mauled copy of the California civil code for 1905". The fact that he owned an outdated version of the California civil code highlights two important ideas. First, that given his status, he could not afford a newer one. Secondly and more importantly, that as colored man, his rights and what he could expect from life were falling behind; he was doomed to be inferior to his white counterparts. Finally, it may also imply that he did not necessarily need newer versions since the situation was not evolving; a black man was not expecting to be offered more rights in the foreseeable future. A pair of large gold-rimmed spectacles hung from a nail on the wall of his bed. Both the quality of his pair off glasses and where he chooses to keep them highlight how important they are to him. Firstly, he gives much importance to reading as it is the only way he could escape the denigrating image painted on him by society; by being well-read, he could prove both to himself and his environment that he is not less intellectually capable than any other. Secondly, gold-rimmed glasses are valuable; reading was undoubtedly his only friend, it was all he had left, the last rampart standing between him and absolute loneliness. The fact that he chose to keep his glasses hung on the wall of his bed shows both attachment and pride; he kept them near and out of harm's reach while also displaying them as a trophy.

Finally, the "meager yellow light" thrown by the electric globe in his room can be seen as a symbol of how little hope he is left with. While the other characters' quarters are repeatedly described as being well-lit, sometimes blindingly so, Crooks has to make do with how little light he had, just as he has to settle for how little advantages he enjoys.

Conclusion:

While the use of the n-word, among other harsh expressions, has earned the novella an infamous reputation with publishers, it would be unfair to simply and exclusively designate it as a surge of racism emanating from Steinbeck. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that the author succeeded in emulating the way his characters would have spoken would have they been real, given the context; after all, he was raised in that very setting, as someone who is from

California and who lived through the Great Depression. This accurate reproduction of language is more of an account of the treatment colored Americans had to endure notably due to the Jim Crow Laws than it is an attempt at indulging in racist writing.

John Steinbeck signs with *Of Mice and Men* an eloquent and lucid portrayal of the perception of colored Americans in the United States of America during the 1930s. The genius of his endeavor comes partially in the essence of his ideas; for he held original thoughts at a time where it was both easy and customary to denigrate African Americans, but most notably from the form of his writing. He designed a fine piece of literature where, instead of directly throwing stones at individuals or groups of people, questions prejudices and perceptions of his time in a subtlety that does not strip his reader from his common sense or free judgment. Steinbeck does not insult his audience, nor does he shame them. Instead, he describes as bluntly as he can, a reality that he feels ought to be condemned.

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