Misogyny in *Of Mice and Men*

Jean Emery

In this feminist reading, Jean Emery argues that *Of Mice and Men* is a chronicle of society's injustice to women. She describes the bunkhouse as a patriarchal world in which the players attempt to eliminate all vestiges of femininity. In her analysis, Lennie and George personify the stereotypical attributes of femininity and masculinity. Lennie is docile, submissive, and dependent; George is his protector. In choosing to kill Lennie, Emery concludes, George chooses masculinity over femininity, confirming the novel's message that a partnership integrating both traits is doomed.

*Of Mice and Men* is not, as most critics would have us believe, a poignant, sentimental drama of an impossible friendship and an unattainable dream. Rather, the story actually demonstrates the achievement of a dream—that of a homogeneous male fraternity not just to repress, but to eliminate women and femininity. *Of Mice and Men* depicts the rescue of men from women, "a melodrama of beset manhood," to use the words of Nina Baym.

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. Ultimately, George's need and desire to confirm his membership in the powerful and dominant male community drives him to kill his partner as a sacrificial rite of initiation. Bolstered by smaller, less dramatic, but nonetheless significant sacrifices, the text illustrates the insidious presence of this practice in our culture at large. That for more than 50 years literary critics have read the text purely as an exposé of a failed *economic* dream corroborates a blindness to this issue and complicity in preserving the patriarchy.

George and Lennie as a couple display the stereotypical attributes of husband and wife. Lennie's refrain, "I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you," solemnizes a kind of marriage vow between them. "We got a future," George says in reply. The glue that binds George and Lennie is the dream of a house and a couple of acres where they can "live off the fatta the lan':" George, the masculine creator of this dream, gives it voice and grounds it in the realm of possibility. But it is "feminine" Lennie who nurtures it and keeps it alive with his boundless obsession for hearing George tell it "like you done before."

As in many traditional marriages, this is not a partnership of equals but one of lord and vassal, owner and owned. George as the patriarch makes the decisions, controls the finances, decides where they'll work and live, dictates the conditions of the relationship ("no rabbits" is the threat employed), even regulates when Lennie can and cannot speak. Yet George wants power without the burden of responsibility. "God, you're a lot of trouble," he says more than once to Lennie. "I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn't have you on my tail."

George's droning retelling of the dream is done primarily for Lennie's benefit. George's own dream is really something quite different: "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." The latent message, of course, is that life would be better without the complications of a relationship of a dependent "other."

**Power Issues**

Relationships in this story center on the issue of power: who will have it and who will not. Obsessed with his ability to control Lennie's behavior (just as Curley is driven to regulate his wife's), George admonishes Lennie for carrying dead mice in his pocket, for directly responding to a question from the Boss, for bringing a pup into the bunkhouse. Such power frightens and, at the same time, thrills George. "Made me seem God damn smart alongside him," George tells Slim. "Why he'd do any damn thing I tol' him. If I tol'
him to walk over a cliff, over he'd go.” George then recounts the time Lennie nearly drowned demonstrating exactly such obedience.

Peter Lisca suggests that George needs Lennie as a rationalization for his own failure. But George’s failure is not just his inability to establish his own autonomy. It is also his struggle to assure himself of his own masculinity and reject the disturbing influence of such feminine traits as gentleness, compassion, submissiveness, and weakness. Lennie’s size and strength, a constant reminder of George’s own physical puniness, presents a constant threat to George’s vulnerable masculinity, clearly displayed in Lennie’s effortful emasculation of Curley when Lennie crushes the bully’s hand.

Demonstrations of masculinity suffuse the text. The ranch George and Lennie come to work—a stronghold of physical effort, rationality, and orderliness—reeks with maleness. The bunkhouse, utilitarian and void of decoration except for “those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe,” exemplifies the heroic male struggle to control nature, other men, and, inevitably, women.

Woman and, correspondingly, feminine traits are intruders and threats to this world, “entrapriers” and “domesticators” in Baym’s words, woman as temptress thwarting man in his journey of self-discovery and definition.

**The Sexual Snare**

In the novel some of the central female figures are the whores, who use their sexual powers to seduce men, robbing them of their financial stake. Women are poison, George tells us, “jailbait on a trigger.” George and Lennie’s dream, one all the men subscribe to in some measure, is, not surprisingly, devoid of women. The female taint precipitates the pathetic destruction of Lennie and, invariably, the ruination of every man’s dream.

Curley’s wife, the evil, disloyal seductress, personifies the “fallen” woman. She flaunts her sexuality (her only effective weapon in this arena), dressing like a bordello whore—heavy makeup, painted fingernails, red ostrich feathers on her slippers. She triggers the story’s tragic events and George foresees this. “Been any trouble since she got here?” he asks.

Curley’s wife (the only woman appearing in the story aside from the spectral Aunt Clara), is, in fact, so antagonis-

tic to this environment that she remains nameless. She’s called “tease,” “tramp,” “tart,” “rat-trap,” “jailbait,” “bitch,” “Curley’s wife”—identity always contingent upon her relationship to men. By refusing to speak her name, these men attempt to rob her of her power over them, just as a superstitious and primitive native might refuse to invoke the name of a feared spirit.

George’s reaction to her is particularly intriguing, since his vehemence seems vastly out of proportion to her possible influence on his life. “I seen ’em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her.” George clearly doesn’t trust or even like women; to him they are liars and manipulators like the girl in Weed who cries rape when Lennie clutches at her dress. Curley’s wife threatens the same action when Crooks and Candy try to throw her out of Crooks’s room.

The essential conflict of the story—the strength of the bond between George and Lennie—hinges upon this desire for a world without the contaminating female. Lennie, despite his size, possesses characteristics traditionally identified as feminine; and his continued habitation of the male sphere eventually becomes intolerable for everyone, including George.

Stereotypically feminine, docile and submissive, dependent and lacking in self-assertiveness, Lennie obeys George like a good woman. “Baffled, unknowingly powerful, utterly will-less, he can not move without a leader,” observes Harry Thornton Moore. Lennie is a pleaser, seeking approval, desiring love. We first see him mimicking George’s behavior, a conscious ploy to endear himself to his protector. Lennie loves soft, sensual objects: mice, puppies, silks curls. He possesses maternal cravings, revealed in his affection for small animals. And playing into long-held prejudices against women’s intelligence, Steinbeck makes Lennie a half-wit.

Lennie’s superhuman strength does not contradict this interpretation of him as a feminine figure, but rather confirms it. Throughout history, taboos surrounding virginity, menstruation, and sexual intercourse have expressed men’s dread of female sexuality. Images such as *vagina dentata* exemplify men’s inordinate fear of submitting to a force that is unseen, uncontrollable, and menacing to their essential nature—a generalized dread of women,” in Freud’s assessment: “The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with
her femininity and of then showing himself incapable."

George displays mistrust, disgust, and barely disguised rage on the topic of women. He seems particularly to resent the shackles of his promise to Aunt Clara to care for Lennie (a vow, notably, given to a woman).

**Rescue from Women**

*Of Mice and Men*’s solution to this strangling bind is the rescue of men by men from the grip of women. Freud, of course, 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.” These cultural centers of male ritual and values ensure male solidarity and the overall segregation of the sexes within the tribal group. Any breach of house norms meets with severe censure and even social ostracism.

Sexual segregation is *de rigueur* on the ranch. “You ain’t wanted here,” Candy hisses at Curley’s wife when she invades Crooks’ room. Curley’s wife and Lennie are excluded from the male rituals of card games, trips to town, and horseshoe tournaments. But then, so too are Crooks and Candy, despite their possession of the correct biological anatomy.

Crooks is ostracized because of race, a nonconformity to the norms of the tribal group. Candy’s case is more complicated. His strength and usefulness are on the wane. He has been crippled, hence he is less of a man. More importantly, however, he fails to uphold the standards of desired male behavior. Just as his muscle has withered, Candy’s emotional state has grown soft and sentimental. Male power demands a code of behavior that asserts control over property and possessions, whether they be wife or dog. Sentinel and attachment—dare one mention love—is of no consequence. Candy’s dog is too old and feeble for work and has a “bad stink” to boot. But Candy cannot bring himself to perform his manly duty of ridding himself of this no-longer-useful appendage. Carlson, rational, cold-hearted, eminently practical, the antithesis of femininity, takes on the job himself, in the process sealing Candy’s expulsion from the male community.

**Lesson for George**

The lesson is not lost on George. When the crisis comes and Lennie is no longer “manageable,” George, like a rancher suddenly confronted with a pet dog that has taken to killing sheep, follows Carlson’s example, right down to shooting Lennie in the very spot Carlson marked on the dog’s head. George’s killing of Lennie is, in effect, his sacrificial rite of initiation into the male enclave.

By his action, George chooses virility over compassion, masculinity over femininity. Stoic, calm, and nearly emotionless, George’s behavior, unlike Candy’s, is manly. His lie about the actual events of Lennie’s death, which on the surface suggests deep-felt emotion, actually serves to enhance his own male stature: diminutive George wrestles the giant, bone-crushing brute, Lennie, for a loaded Luger—and winning, getting off a clean shot to the back of the neck like a skilled marksman—a narrative straight out of a Western pulp magazine. Slim’s proposal to go into town for a drink validates George’s membership in the clubhouse. “Ya hadda, George. I swear you hadda.”

By murdering Lennie, George rides himself of the very thing that sets himself apart from other men. Without Lennie, he is no longer a curiosity, a man of questionable masculinity because he travels with another. The demise of Lennie is also the demise of the dream. George thus establishes his solidarity with the other men for whom the dream will remain just talk.

Lennie’s death need not necessarily mean the end of the dream, however. After all, Candy is still eager to pursue it. But partnership with Candy requires a different kind of relationship than the one George had with Lennie; and unwilling to reestablish a new hierarchy of dominator and dominated, one where George is not so obviously superior, he quickly abandons the dream.

What really stands in the way of the dream, however, is George’s inability to accept the implied responsibility of the dream: shared contact with another—equal—human being. As Louis Owens writes, “It is Lennie’s need for contact with other living beings, a craving the men of this world deny, that brings about his destruction.” George, of course, is the instrument of this destruction and the ultimate judge of its validity. The inherent message of the text is that a partnership based on mutual caring and respect is doomed and the model of marrying masculine with feminine is by nature destructive and tragic. Ironically, while the masculine world despises female dependence and submissiveness, member-
ship in the male community in fact rejects the possibility of true independence and autonomy.

The melodrama of bested manhood neatly rescues the men on this Salinas Valley ranch from the entrappers and domesticators. By story’s end, all vestiges of femininity have been eliminated—Lennie, Curley’s wife, Candy’s dog, Lennie’s mice and rabbits, even the deer that bound silently across the path through the willows to the pool; a path, it should be noted, “beaten hard by boys” and men.

Despite the prevailing belief that this story portrays the pathos of the quest for the American dream, the foregoing evidence suggests that *Of Mice and Men* is a Steinbeckian condemnation of the American male’s inability to accommodate diversity and nonconformity, a terse commentary on misplaced values.

Carlson and Slim epitomize this conflict between domination and compassion. Warren French notes that Carlson is insensitive and brutal; Slim, kindly and perceptive. There is no sentiment in Carlson, an eminently practical, albeit destructive man. Curley’s wife and Lennie, like Candy’s dog, are to Carlson useless, intrusive, and annoying. A man of action, Carlson does not let emotional weakness keep him from doing what a man’s got to do. His having the last word in the story—“Now what the hell ya suppose is eating them two guys?”—attests to the weight given the text’s masculine message.

**Slim’s Characterization**

The characterization of Slim, however, suggests some slight hope for reconciliation between male and female components and saves the text from a completely cynical misogyny. Slim is androgynous, what Carolyn Heilbrun defines as “a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned.” Kindly, perceptive, compassionate, tender, intuitive, Slim is described in feminine terms. Even his hands are lean, delicate and as graceful as a temple dancer. “His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.” Yet his feminine traits are coupled with images of virility. “His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love.” He is “the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leader.” Physically strong, powerful and in control, the others take their cue from Slim, who combines the finest attributes of male and female.

When he finds George and Lennie beside the pool, Slim perceptively recognizes George’s internal struggle. He soothes George as a woman might; and yet, unlike a woman, he instructs George as to what he must do next, what “story” he must tell. The two leave together, as George and Lennie first arrived, a couple. This partnership may be different. Slim, the only character to integrate the masculine and feminine attributes of his own nature, may well influence the man who has so forcefully denied this integration.

**A Compassionate Portrait of Femininity**

Steinbeck’s sympathy clearly lies with the feminine. Lennie tugs at a reader’s heart in the same way that a child or defenseless animal might. So, too, his portrayal of Curley’s wife in death softens earlier, viperous images of her: “And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young.”

But most revealing of Steinbeck’s attitude toward the material is a simple image he creates in the opening pages, one that becomes a metaphor for the text. Shortly before we meet George and Lennie, “a big carp rose to the surface of the pool, gulped air and then sank mysteriously into the dark water again, leaving widening rings on the water.” If Steinbeck had intended our sympathy to lie with the status quo, the fish that rises to the surface would have been something other than a carp—a rainbow trout or a cut-throat perhaps, game fish known as strong, wiley fighters. Instead Steinbeck gives us the carp, a sucker fish, an invader that eventually takes over a pond or stream, muddying the waters and irreversibly altering the environment it penetrates. Smaller, weaker, and less aggressive species are quickly subsumed. Diversity can not be accommodated once the carp arrives. Over time, all except the carp disappear. The pond is no longer a very interesting or “wild” place. It is ruined.

“Violence without tragedy; that is the weakness of this book,” writes Moore. “Sentimental,” say others, dismissing the work as minor. The dictionary tells us sentimental means “influenced more by emotion than reason; acting from feeling rather than from practical and utilitarian mo-
Symbols, Structure, and Fictional Method

Chapter 2

In short, feminine. Steinbeck's carp, the men of the Salinas Valley, eliminate diversity and complexity out of a fear for their own survival. They huddle like a school of fish in their bunkhouse, confiding in their own self-definition residing in the absence of contrasting existences. They reign homogeneous, unvarying, sterile—big fish in ever-dwindling ponds.
Every effort has been made to trace the owners of copyrighted material. The articles in this volume may have been edited for content, length, and/or reading level. The titles have been changed to enhance the editorial purpose of the Opposing Viewpoints® concept. Those interested in locating the original source will find the complete citation on the first page of each article.