

# A Social Realism Analysis of Ageism and Innocence in Faulkner's *the Sound and Fury* and Steinbeck's *of Mice and Men*

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**Abstract:** Social Realism, the Depression-era movement showed harsh realism to depict the injustices of U.S. society. Some of social realist authors wrote in order to protest the inequalities, inhumanities, and emotional suffering. In both novels, retarded person can not be tolerated by society. Lennie is killed and benjy is castigated and is thrown out of home. Benjy and Lennie are the symbol for the lost innocent. The force and harshness seem brutality and barbarity, but upon a closer look we remember it was during a time of poverty, stressing the need for individual survival. We see harshness with old persons. They are cheated. Most of all are in danger; physically or emotionally.

**Keywords:** Social Realism, the Great Depression, Harshness, Oppression, Retarded and Old Persons

## 1. Introduction

Faulkner and Steinbeck dramatized the social turmoil of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era, and criticized impersonal economic forces that divided society into haves and have-nots. Steinbeck weaves social themes around concepts of evolutionary biology and the survival of the fittest. Steinbeck was motivated to arouse sympathy for the poor people. He saw that they were often suffering cruelly in their environment and that the causes for their misery were frequently beyond their control. Steinbeck saw and wrote the lives of innocent victims. His writing implies that these unfortunates could have been well in the materialistic American society. "Throughout a career which spanned four decades, John Steinbeck was a novelist of people. His best books are about ordinary men and women, simple souls who do battle against dehumanizing social forces or who struggle against their own inhumane tendencies and attempt, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to create lives of meaning and worth. At the center of Steinbeck's thematic vision is dialectic between contrasting ways of life: between innocence and experience, between primitivism and progress, and between self-interest and commitment to the human community.

## 2. Innocence and Ageism in Faulkner's *The sound and fury*

In both novels, retarded person can not be tolerated by society. Lennie is killed and benjy is castigated and is thrown out of home (to the asylum). Benjy and Lennie are the symbol for the lost innocent. In 'The Sound and the Fury', Family relationships are disrupted and the move to adulthood, marks a loss of innocence. For example Innocence Caddy smelled like trees. Benjy hates the smell of perfume which replaces Caddy's innocent smell of trees. Italian girl seems to represent to Quentin the innocence that can't last in the world. She also lets him display his southern chivalric ideal, an ideal that seems out of favor there in the North. Quentin is pure kind. He is therefore so in conflict with the world that he can't stay. Mental retardation was considered a curse and a burden that a family had to bear. Families felt ashamed and guilty when they had a retarded child. Benjy is the only rational member of the Compson family. Quentin is indeed insane. He is not able to cope with society and eventually kills himself. He believes that there is no hope with life. Every other member of their family has their horrible issues, and each one is unable to cope well in society. Benjy is the only one with a straight perception of good and evil, and was chosen by Faulkner to be the Christ figure of the novel. It is difficult to believe that a person, considered "mentally retarded," could be the only right-minded one in his family. In our society today, the "simple-minded" are barely considered whole people. Who really needs the sympathy? The "mentally-retarded" or those who are regarded as "sane"

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by society? Another theme is that meaninglessness is perfection. Benjy is unable to think, and unable to communicate. He is the embodiment of innocence. He is the most perfect, the most moral character that the other characters are. Jason is portrayed negatively and is essentially the opposite of Benjy -worldly, angry, and corrupt - and completely immoral. In great depression era money is instead of faith. Sympathy hasn't meaning. Jason says, ' watching pennies has healed more scars than Jesus' (Faulkner, 1992, p.154).

The title is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound of fury, signifying nothing"—but to emphasize the condition of Benjy Compson, the first teller of the tale and, more accurately, the first consciousness from which Faulkner renders the tale. Benjy's mental state, then, is linked forever to that of a young child. He cannot function on the level of an adult. Without language, he moans or howls. His sounds were once interpreted by Caddy and interrupted their activities. But without her, Benjy's tale is full of sound with little capacity to signify. Benjy seems to have a 'sixth-sense' in that he moans (he is unable to speak using words), as if sensing the symbolic nature of Caddy's dirtiness, which hints at her later sexual promiscuity. At the time the children were aged 7 (Quentin), 6 (Caddy), 4 (Jason) and 3 (Benjy). Benjy's ability to sense death is depicted; he instinctively knows that someone is going to die. At every death in the novel, Benjy has certain knowledge of it and moans. When the golfers yell "Caddie", when Caddy wears perfume, when Caddy's daughter Quentin runs away, and when Luster drives the wrong way. In all of these cases, Benjy is noticing that things are different and wrong. Some of the other characters, especially Dilsey and her family, say that Benjy can smell death. Benjy's bellowing shows that something is wrong: he has lost something, someone is mistreating him, or something bad is about to happen. His bellowing brings to the novel the feeling of the loss of the past that is one of its most important themes. In the concluding section of *The Sound and the Fury*, both of which contain Faulkner's warning against modern hypocrisy.

Dilsey's "white trash" is the modern hypocrisy, whose self-righteous hypocrisy prevents them from accepting Benjy and thus keeps out them from the kingdom of heaven.. Dilsey alone seems to understand the meaning of the Easter sermon, which is filled with reference to children. ("Look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus wus like dat once. . . . Ma'y settin in de do' wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus. Like dem chillen dar, de(" little Jesus") , pride and arrogance ("I hears de boasting en de braggin, and humility ("de meek Jesus") (Faulkner, 1992, p. 233).

Dilsey, in her simple faith and enduring humility, says to Benjy, "You's de Lawd's chile, anyway. En I be His'n too, fo long, praise Jesus". (Faulkner, 1992, p.249) Dilsey possesses all those qualities that are absent from the Compsons. She is proud to take him to her church with her because white folks, even own family, are so ashamed of him. In contrast, whereas Mrs. Compson feels that Benjy is a 'judgment on her' Dilsey simply offers Benjy her love and devotion. She is the only one left who can understand Benjy's needs. When she sends Luster out with Benjy in the four-wheeled horse-drawn carriage, she wants Luster to go the exact same way that T. P. always went. Luster cannot understand Benjy's needs, but Dilsey knows that Benjy's mind is simple and needs things in their ordered place. Therefore, when Luster turns the wrong way at the square or at Benjy's "graveyard" Luster disturbs the arrangement of flowers in the blue bottle, causing Benjy to cry. Benjy senses that things are not in their ordered place and begins to howl. As soon as the horse is turned around, however, everything becomes ordered for Benjy and he becomes quiet.

The destructive pride and self-love of the modern world are symbolized by the narcissus which is betrayed by the idiot in both the sketch and the novel; in 'The Sound and the Fury' the narcissus represents the self-love of Mrs. Compson and her sons Jason and Quentin. Traditionally, the narcissus has symbolized egotism and conceit, but it is also the plant of nemesis. In the classic myth, Hera ordered Nemesis, the deity of vengeance, to punish Narcissus for his egotism, and Nemesis changed him into the narcissus flower. Also, the Fates wore wreaths of narcissus flowers, the scent of which was so painfully sweet as to cause madness, a reminder that narcissism, the symbol of egotism and conceit will be ultimately punished. We see harshness treatment with old persons, because in great depression era only strong persons can survive and sympathy is meaningless.

### **3. Innocence and Ageism in Steinbeck's *of Mice and Men***

'Of Mice and Men' is a modern parable about the unfairness of human society. The vulnerable and innocent are impossible to protect from the powerful and cruel. Steinbeck created the novel's two main

characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, to portray victims of forces beyond their control. Steinbeck depicts George and Lennie as two innocents whose dream conflicts with the realities of a world dominated by materialism and greed. The first rule on the ranch was to keep silent in front of injustices. On their arrival, George and Lennie were told: "A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ast no question." (Steinbeck, 1965, p.58)

Innocence has many different functions in 'Of Mice and Men'. When we first realize Lennie has a mental disability, he can be described as having a childlike innocence. His attitude towards the world and others is simplistic, childish, and often warm view. Innocence also functions as the opposite of guilt. Lennie, perhaps linked to the first notion of childlike innocence, is presented as a sympathetic character in spite of his constant failings and murdering tendencies. Innocence is something of a godsend and an excuse for bad behavior. It seems to fit in with Steinbeck's insistence that characters be treated without judgment.

In depression era only the strong survived. The way in which Carlson kills the dog—with a gunshot to the back of the head—foreshadows Lennie's death and compares Lennie with Candy's dog: both of them are powerless, innocent, and doomed. Description of the heron eating the snake symbolizes when George has to shoot Lennie in the back of the head, it shows that the weaker (Lennie) is always being beat by the stronger. Slim's puppies were in the same position. His young dog just had puppies and he couldn't care for them. They were struggling to stay alive and Slim knew he had to do something. He couldn't sell them because nobody had any money to buy them. He then came to the decision to drown them in the river. This way the puppies wouldn't be struggling and he wouldn't have to worry about caring for them. Once again, it was a harsh decision to make but at the end it was the best one.

The two characters of Lennie and George are practically polar opposites both physically and mentally. Lennie is a kind soul with a big heart with a child like innocence; he is indifferent to the pain of the Depression. In the book it becomes increasingly obvious that he is rather mentally unstable and is also really unaware of the world outside his own. Unlike George he is slow witted. He is very much like a child, but he is stuck in a very big man's body. George as is shown is the opposite, he is intelligent quick to speak and think, but unlike Lennie, George is aware of the darker side of life and the Depression which leaves him a very serious person and also very a realistic thinker. The two almost use each other for an emotional and physical support .Lennie relies on George to look after him and keep him from getting into trouble whereas George relies on Lennie as a distraction from the real world.

The relationship between Lennie and his companion George is complex and the reader is initially struck by the harsh manner in which George often speaks to Lennie. However, it is the strength of their friendship that binds the two men together and makes them mutually dependent. Lennie's dependency is that of a child to its guardian, but George is equally as dependent on Lennie as he is the one person that can be trusted absolutely. Lennie cannot function normally due to his child-like mental state. Lennie's disability has gotten him into trouble numerous times in the novel because his simple and innocent intentions were misunderstood. According saying of George "Lennie wants to touch everything he likes" (Steinbeck, 1965, p.41). In fact, on seeing a red dress, Lennie goes to touch it and confuses the woman wearing it, who believes he was planning on raping her. Curly thinks that he smiles to him.

Steinbeck's story evokes a challenging issue of responsibility and justice. A death has occurred, but the reader is left with the question of whether Lenny committed murder. Lenny did not have an "evil act" in mind when he was stroking Curley's wife's hair. He was frightened and clumsy but not murderous when he kills her. Medical educators could discuss the critical difference of intent between George was placing himself at legal risk by shooting Lenny. He wanted to protect simple-minded Lenny from the rage of the townspeople and a potentially cruel death, such as a lynching. George's actions could be viewed as a compassionate action in preventing Lenny's suffering. This might seem animal and barbaric, but upon a closer look we remember it was during a time of poverty, stressing the need for individual survival.

The men assume that Lennie has stolen the weapon for his own protection - again revealing how little they understand Lennie, who is absolutely incapable of such calculation. After he finds the body of Curley's wife, George notes that though Lennie does many "bad things," he never acts out of "meanness," only out of an inability to understand the world or control himself. George's choice of words is suitable. "Meanness"

suggests "cruelty". Many of the characters in the novel act out of self-interested malice. Lennie never does. He acts with the best intentions; indeed he has simplicity of soul that contrasts basically with the others. Lennie doesn't mean to do bad things- they simply happen to him. He acts badly without intending to act at all. Indeed, Lennie's crime is a fundamental inability to understand the weakness of others. He literally loves things to death. His puppy is soft, so he pets it to death. Only George understands him fully, knows his childish mixture of innocence and dangerousness. Others, including Curley's wife, treat him as a sort of recorder for their own complaints and fantasies. They are failure to understand the danger that goes along with Lennie's obvious innocence. Lennie, like an animal, doesn't understand his actions as morally wrong. Rather, he thinks of them simply in terms of George's approval. Like a dog who feels a mixture of fear and love for his master, Lennie is both fiercely loyal to George and terrified of displeasing his friend. He knows instinctively that he has done something wrong both in killing the puppy and in killing Curley's wife. For Lennie, however, the two actions are roughly equivalent- in both cases; he simply feels that he risks losing George's permission to care for the rabbits.

Rabbit story of George shows how Lennie is like a big kid and how George is the parent telling the bedtime story to Lennie, the child. Lennie is presented as having the personality of a small child, and thus his fascination with rabbits because everyone knows how captivated children are by cute domesticated rabbits. Lennie is obsessed with the joy of petting the soft coat of rabbits.

Lennie is totally defenseless. He cannot avoid the dangers presented by Curley, Curley's wife, or the world at large. His innocence raises him to a standard of pure goodness. Lennie's innocence creates confidence. Crooks talks freely to Lennie, who has the same effect on Curley's wife. She cannot speak to her husband but pours out her troubles to Lennie. His enthusiasm for the vision of their future farm proves easily spread as he convinces George, Candy, Crooks, and the reader that such a paradise might be possible. But he is a character whom Steinbeck sets up for disaster, a character whose innocence only seems to ensure his inevitable destruction. Black people in 'Of Mice and Men' and 'The Sound and the Fury' accept retarded persons, while white people have harsh behavior to them. Crook accepts Lennie to come into his room, and Dilsey's bringing the idiot to the Negro church on Easter Sunday.

Steinbeck's characters are often powerless, due to intellectual, economic, and social circumstances. Lennie possesses the greatest physical strength of any character, which should therefore establish a sense of respect as he is employed as a ranch hand. However, his intellectual handicap undercuts this and results in his powerlessness. Economic powerlessness is established as many of the ranch hands are victims of society during the Great Depression. The hopelessness is used by John Steinbeck to protest against the treatment of the disabled such as old persons during the Great Depression. Candy knows that he does not have a future. Crooks emphasizes this fact, when he says that Candy will be "You'll be a swamper here till they take you out in a box. Hell, I seen too many guys."(Steinbeck, 1965, p.37) Candy swamper out houses, because he is not able to do something else. Although he hopes that their dream will work, he recognizes that it is unrealistic. It is unrealistic because of his disability. Steinbeck's protest against the treatment of the disabled is evident from the way he describes Candy's hopelessness. Crooks is clearly one of the most intelligent on the ranch but is oppressed by the hierarchy of America and the ranch. The repeated reference to Candy's hopelessness could be understood as a protest against ageism. He says more than once that if he "Jus' as soon as I can't swamper out no bunkhouses they'll put me on the county."(Steinbeck, 1965, p.29) He "wisht somebody'd shoot" him, if he gets fired. 'I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple.'(Steinbeck, 1965, p.22) He "won't have a place to /Candy "subsided". He suggests to tell the boss about that dispute, but he knows that "nobody'd listen to" them. Steinbeck uses these situations to protest against ageism.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In both novels, retarded person can not be tolerated by society. Lynching is commonplace device for mastering blacks is performed against retarded persons too. Lennie is killed and Benji is castigated and is sent to mental house. We also see harshness with old persons. Sympathy is meaningless. They are cheated. Most of all are in danger; physically or emotionally. Their money is robbed from them. Other persons don't respect them and call them with unpleasant titles.

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