Exploring the Paradoxes of Masculinity in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: From a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: This article explores John Steinbeck's portrayal of men and their problematic masculinities in *Of Mice and Men*, by using masculinity studies and the novella's cultural context. It argues that the represented men attempt but fail to secure traditional masculine traits during the 1930s in America. This struggle is shared among all the male characters regardless of their strength, resilience, marital position, or social background. Steinbeck represents the muscular Lennie as behaving like a child. Slim, the charismatic character, embodies a "new masculinity" that challenges traditional roles like starting and financing a family while displaying emotional intimacy with other men (Falabella 2000: 64). George, who supports Lennie, is likewise weakened by his single status, working-class background, and failure to achieve the American Dream. Curley, a middle-class man, exhibits a lack of virility, financial independence, and physical strength. He also shows insecurity when subjugating his wife and workers. Crooks, the African American worker, has problems in performing masculinity traits, especially when Curley's wife insults him. The article discusses how the social construction of masculinity attributed contradictory traits to men. It concludes that masculinity is disrupted under class and racial oppression, highlighting how men struggled to maintain their identities during the Depression.

Keywords: depression decade, John Steinbeck, masculinity, men

1. Introduction and cultural context

In his social novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937), John Steinbeck investigates the struggles of the working class during the Depression Decade. However, the writer avoids idealising the manhood and masculinity of the proletarians, contrary to the governmental and literary tendencies of the period (Armengol 2014). Proletarian literature focuses on conveying the harsh reality encountered by proletarians to provoke revolt against poverty and unemployment (Dickstein 1996: 230). Mike Gold, a prominent leftist and novelist of the decade, called for a proletarian literary movement in 1929 and advocated for a manly and masculine rebellion against social injustice. In his essay "Go Left, Young Writers!", Gold addresses male writers, providing guidelines for them on what to articulate in the decade's literature: "Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill, and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle" (Gold 1929: 382-3). Gold aims to engage men in leftist and radical contexts, encouraging them to write about their real struggles without diminishing their masculinity. Borrowing from Armengol, Gold associates "proletarian fiction

with vigor and masculinity" (Armengol 2014: 62). The leftist magazine *New Masses*, which Gold edits and where he publishes his proletarian writings, including "Go Left, Young Writers!", is filled with images of strong, muscular men at work.

In contrast, as Armengol (2014: 63) notes, the Decade's government-funded projects, such as Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus*, and Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, resist and interrogate some of these proletarian hyper-masculine representations. These documentary projects present a gallery of images and descriptions that indicate how male bodies are weak yet also "dignified" and celebrated. The Roosevelt administration, which celebrated the American Dream ideology of "the self-made man," seemed to encourage men to feign masculinity, demonstrate their physical strength, and act resiliently despite their vulnerability in order to survive and face the hardship (Armengol 2014: 61). In this context, Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men* provides a more complex and nuanced representation of men. He neither dignifies nor ideally empowers his male characters; rather, he portrays them as emasculated individuals suffering from social conditions and societal ideals, as well as expectations that hinder them from behaving like masculine men.

The current study examines how men are objectified and emasculated in the context of the 1930s economic and social crisis despite their class, race, marital status, or physical and mental abilities. It also analyses how the represented men in the novella challenge masculine ideals assigned to them. This study thereby contributes to the discussion of problematized masculinity in literature from the Depression. In addition, while extensive research addresses gender issues and misogyny in *Of Mice and Men*, the representation of men and their troubled masculinity in the novella remains barely explored, particularly in relation to its cultural and historical contexts. For this purpose, this study adopts a textual cultural approach. It examines the paradoxes of masculinity in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* using the framework of studies on masculinity by scholars like Rotundo, Kimmel, and McLean. It integrates a close reading of specific themes and characters in the novella with a cultural analysis of masculinity and the novella's surrounding context. This methodology is employed in the article in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Steinbeck confuses the depictions of his male characters and the issue of conflicting masculinities within the 1930s.

2. Literature review

Much of the research on Steinbeck's novella focuses on two critical perspectives. The first, as demonstrated by Bashar, Zeb, and Khan's study (2019), analyses the representation of Curley's wife as a stereotyped woman, conveying men's misogyny in patriarchal, male-dominated society. The second, as indicated by Sandström's study (2024), examines the novella's themes of homosexuality and sexual confusion. These two critical interpretations overlook the discussion of masculinity as a socio-cultural construct from men's studies perspectives, notably how masculinity is depicted within the Depression. During the 1930s, the decade known for its difficult economic and social circumstances, many men lost their

conventional roles as family breadwinners and protectors, causing them to feel vulnerable (Armengol 2014). The loss of these roles, in addition to poverty, difficulty to meet basic needs such as food and shelter, discrimination against job seekers, and the government's endorsement of the self-made man ideology, all these aspects from the 1930s, put pressure on men and contributed to the objectification and emasculation of men as depicted in *Of Mice and Men*.

Although much has been written about manhood and masculinity in Steinbeck's works, few critics connect the problematised virility and masculinity in *Of Mice and* to the context of the 1930s. For instance, Gladstein (2004: 110) explores Steinbeck's sympathetic take on men's masculine sexuality, women's objectification, and the lack of women's importance in men's lives in his novels *Cannery Row* and *The Wayward Bus*. In these novels, women are represented as objects, prostitutes, and commodities—things possessed by men. Gladstein (2004: 111) further comments on the resemblance between *Cannery Row*, *Tortilla Flat*, and *Of Mice and Men*, noting that these novels present "a curiously homosocial masculine idyll of groups of men living together". Person Jr. (2009: 151) similarly argues that *Of Mice and Men*, like Melville's novels, "destabilises conventional constructs of masculinity (patriarchal, heterosexual, and phallocentric) in order to explore alternative and subversive masculinities". Emery (1992: 152) likewise suggests that Lennie's and George's relationship resembles "a kind of marriage", with George embodying attributes of masculinity as a supporter and leader, while Lennie shows dependence and submissiveness. In the same vein, Covais (2022: 58) argues that feminine attributes, such as love and tenderness, featured in George's relationship with Lennie, replace the hegemonic and aggressive traits of masculinity, particularly in the context of social conflicts.

Hart (2004: 34) discusses how moral and dramatic issues such as sexism and racism are philosophically presented in the novella. Hart notes that Steinbeck presents these issues not to provide solutions, but to "agitate, to provoke, to anger, to cause doubt and raise a multitude of questions". He explains that, instead of judging the stereotyped woman, Curley's wife, and the African American character, Crooks, Steinbeck allows readers to reach their own conclusions about the characters' behaviours (Hart 2004: 35). Finally, Bashar and Zeb (2019: 53), from a Derridean perspective, discuss the binary oppositions (man/woman, white/black, and strong/weak) featured in *Of Mice and Men*, suggesting that these oppositions have been established through "a dominant ideology". This dominant ideology was increasingly challenged in American society during that time period.

Armengol (2014) discusses how men's masculinity is complex in the context of the Depression. The current article uses Armengol's ideas as a framework to explore the depictions of men in *Of Mice and Men*, focusing on the paradoxes of their masculinity shaped by the socio-cultural context of the 1930s. Regarding how Steinbeck represents men in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, Armengol (2014: 64) concludes that Steinbeck confuses the "hypermasculinity" of the proletarians. Armengol argues, "most of Steinbeck's male characters do actually seem to opt for a softer, less aggressive, more 'feminine' pattern of manhood based on tenderness, sweetness, companionship, and (working-class) solidarity with each

other" (2014: 64). By contextualizing the novella and using studies of masculinity, the current study underscores the contradictions in represented masculinities and how Steinbeck depicts male characters as both objectified and emasculated, yet aggressive and emotionally indifferent, regardless of their status, race, class, or physical or mental abilities. In doing so, this analysis contributes to the study of masculinity in literature from the 1930s, underlying the complexity of securing a masculine identity at a difficult time in America.

3. Theoretical underpinnings

To lay the groundwork for this investigation, it is important to highlight the changes in masculine ideals over the centuries in America, as noted by masculinity researchers. In his historical analysis of American manhood, Rotundo (1993: 2) emphasises how "communal manhood" emerged in the early 18th century, linking a man's identity to his commitment to his role as "the head of the household" and to his devotion to his community. However, over the course of subsequent centuries, this meaning of masculinity transformed. Physical strength, personal character, and aggression were considered core traits of masculinity in the 19th century (Rotundo 1993: 6). By the 20th century, Rotundo notes (1993: 285), men's "self-realization" becomes the main focus. Even acts of violence and primitiveness are not stigmatized or judged with fear as they were in the previous centuries. In *Of Mice and Men*, we notice a lack of communal commitment to family duties and that working-class men are single. The absence of these traditional roles seem to cause their aggression, violence, insecurity, and fear of being judged by one another. Their masculinity is tainted with confusion and frustration, shifting according to their varied circumstances, race, class, and character. Rotundo (1993: 1) declares that concepts like manliness and manhood, much like gender, are "human invention[s]"; they are culturally created and conventionally inherited by individuals. The discussion section delves at how Steinbeck's work challenges traditional ideas of masculinity by having his characters embodying shifting gender ideals in the midst of the Depression.

Kimmel (2006) clarifies how the meanings of masculinity and manhood have changed culturally and socially in America. He writes: "Manhood is neither static nor timeless. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it's socially constructed […] it is created in our culture" (2006: 3). He notes that American men's identities and "masculinities" nuance based on external forces such as race, class, and age (Kimmel, 2006: 3-4). Kimmel (2006: 13) outlines how models of manhood have changed over time. At the turn of the 19th century, the common archetype of manhood was "the Genteel Patriarch", a man embodying compassion towards his work, community, and family. Another archetype is "the Heroic Artisan", a self-reliant man who treats women with formality and respects his male companions (Kimmel 2006: 13). A third is "The Self-Made Man", whose identity derives entirely from activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth, status, and social mobility (2006: 13). This suggests a change from working for the community's benefit to concentrating on personal improvement and fulfilment (2006: 14). In *Of Mice and Men*, ranch workers like George and Lennie

seek the fulfilment of their American Dream of owning a farm. Yet, their dream is never achieved, leaving their masculinity in confusion. Even Curley, despite his middle-class position, fails to embody "the Heroic Artisan". His authority over the farm workers is weakened by the fact that the farm is his father's possession, and he practices oppression over the workers and abuse towards his wife. Thus, Curley's masculinity is called into question, as discussed later.

In defining the basic version of masculinity, Kimmel (2006: 4-5) points out that masculinity is not about men exercising oppression over woman; rather, it is about men's fear of being dominated, humiliated, and disapproved by other stronger men. It is "largely a homosocial enactment"; it is also about "homophobia", the fear of being emasculated and perceived as homosexual (2006: 5). In American culture, men are scared of being seen as "less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened" (2006: 4). Kimmel highlights how Curley's wife comments on men's fears of one another in Steinbeck's novella. She tells Candy and Crooks: "You're all scared of each other, that's what. Ever' one of you's scared the rest is going' to get something on you" (Steinbeck 1937: 96). As analysed later, Steinbeck occasionally represents working-class men as emotional, showing care and tenderness towards one another. However, at other moments, their emotionality is mingled with violence to the extent that the novella ends with George's shooting of Lennie, while Slim, the seemingly most masculine character in the novella, demonstrates empathy in this situation.

McLean (2018) comments on the contradictions and complexities of masculinity in men's society. One contradiction is that men are culturally encouraged to hide their pain and show emotional indifference, despite their need for love and support (2018: 71). Another paradox is that misogyny and men's fear of women are implicit in masculinity, despite the fact that men regard their sexual performance, heterosexuality, and intimacy with women as demonstrations of their power and manliness (2018: 72). Mclean writes: "The female world remains both intensely desirable and repulsive. It offers pleasure, love and security, but also threatens to undermine the masculine facade." (2018: 72). This paradox is particularly featured in Steinbeck's text, where the workers view Curley's wife as a sexual trap that causes trouble on the farm. While they hate her presence around them, the absence of women in their lives deepens their suffering and emphasises their emasculation. Their situation is contradictory. They try to repress their emotions, yet they reflect care and tenderness, as seen when George treats Lennie like a partner or a child of his own early in the text.

Other masculinity scholars support the ideas about the fluctuation of masculine attributes. For example, Cornwall (2000) critiques feminists' consideration of men as "oppressors", arguing that oppression and "aggression", usually assigned to men, are social constructs that change based on context. As Cornwall (2000: 10) states, "Gender relations are context-bound: in one setting we might behave in one way, while in others we might behave differently". Gregory Smith (2018) suggests that dichotomies —binary oppositions established culturally— play a significant role in reinforcing men's oppressive actions and shaping masculinity's traits. The contrastive categories between men and women

often associate women with emotions, dependence, and lack of agency. Meanwhile, they relate men to rationality, lack of empathy (the difficulty of expressing or understanding one's feelings), independence, and the struggle for power (Smith 2018: 119). Smith (2018: 138) declares: "Men's identity is also seen as being in terms of separateness, that men should 'stand alone'. The idea that men should stand alone is very prominent throughout most Western cultures." However, to free men from the oppression assigned to them, these dichotomies should be challenged and avoided because they are not inevitable; they are merely cultural constructs (2018: 184). According to Falabella (2000: 64), "new masculinity" is replacing men's competition and their lust for authority with men's solidarity within one group—developing intimacy with themselves, their partners, children, and the wider society. In the text under examination, working-class men sometimes exhibit dependence, cooperation, and lack of agency. In other situations, they embody individualism and a desire for personal affirmation, displaying gender ambiguity that fluctuates between feminine and masculine characteristics.

Feminists agree with masculinity scholars that gender, which includes the characteristics of both femininity and masculinity, is socially and culturally established. Butler (1989), for example, posits that sex and gender attributes are not born; they are performative. Both men and women behave based on what society imposes on them. To fit in with their societies' conventions, they mask their behaviours and conceal their true identities. Butler describes gender as "a corporeal style, a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one's own flesh as a cultural sign." (Butler 1989: 256). It is changeable rather than fixed. Friedan (1963: 15) discusses how middle-class career women in modern America were encapsulated in their domestic roles, suffering from a "feminine mystique". She sees men as facing a comparable problem. Friedan writes: "It seemed to me that men weren't really the enemy—they were fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill" (1963: 20). Men were forced to perform power, authority, and violence to be accepted as men. Women were therefore objectified and marginalised in these contexts. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck complicates this situation. Even when displaying violence or self-assertion, men consistently fail to maintain their masculinity. Steinbeck strives to liberate his male characters from assigned roles and attributes, suggesting that men, too, are victims struggling in their lives.

Rather than accusing the writer of being misogynistic or anti-feminist, this article contends that Steinbeck undermines traditional masculinity characteristics and blurs the distinctions between femininity and masculinity. Taking into account the arguments put forth by masculinity scholars, the study examines Steinbeck's challenge to the traits of masculinity attributed to men in modern America.

4. Discussion

The represented male characters in the novella perform masculinity with confusion, and a man's complete manliness is largely absent. While Steinbeck portrays an enclosed patriarchal society of men during the Depression, the masculinity of these characters is called into question. Curley, the son of the farm's owner, is assumed

to be the man in power, but he never fulfils the role of breadwinner and family supporter. A similar observation can be made about the workers on the farm: Lennie, George, Slim, Crooks, and others. Despite their strong physical appearances, a trait culturally seen as a sign of masculinity, these men try but fail to change their social position. This section analyses how Steinbeck's male characters exhibit dysfunctional and incomplete masculine traits and how they struggle to embody pure masculinity. Steinbeck challenges the traditional attributes of masculinity, such as physical strength, independence, and emotional indifference, highlighting the complex realities of male identity within the harsh contexts of the Depression. Instead of idealising the characters and the embodiment of the culturally assigned masculinity, the novelist depicts his men as reflecting contradictory and conflicting aspects of masculinity.

Muscular physical appearance, which was culturally identified as a masculine attribute for men in 1930s America (Armengol 2014: 62) is interrogated in *Of Mice and Men*. Rather than dignifying this trait, Steinbeck equates it with primitiveness and immaturity, particularly in his portrayal of Lennie. He also associates it with emasculation in the representation of Slim. Lennie, the physically strongest character, is the most cognitively incompetent and emotionally immature man. As a simpleminded individual, he is seen and treated as a subhuman, compared to animals several times: "snorting into the water like a horse" (Steinbeck 1937: 3); "Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water" (1937: 3); "he's [...] Strong as a bull" (1937: 26). George, his companion, refers to him as "crazy bastard" more than once (1937: 40). Slim notices how Lennie's behaviour of hiding the mice and puppies from George resembles that of a child. He tells George: "He's just like a kid, ain't he?" (1937: 53). Even Curley's wife calls Lennie "nuts[...] Jus' like a big baby" (1937: 112). Despite his big size and strength, Lennie is perceived as a child. In offering this characterisation, Steinbeck diverges from the 1930s celebration of the physical strength of the proletariat, advocated by proletarian writers like Gold. Armengol argues that "American culture during the Depression became increasingly obsessed with muscular, rather than success-oriented, manifestations of masculinity" (2014: 61). By breaking from this cultural mainstream, Steinbeck deconstructs a societal norm that equates working-class men's muscles with their masculinity.

Steinbeck seems to contradict and challenge the connotations and meanings attached to words that have been traditionally established in societies. For example, the name "Lennie Small", is used ironically. The character is known as "Small," but he is physically powerful and large, comparable to the other men on the ranch. Tom describes Lennie as being big and strong like a "bull" (Steinbeck 1937: 26). The same may be suggested for the meanings assigned to the words "men" and "masculinity". The generally and traditionally accepted connotations of these words refer to men's power, resilience, and communal contributions (Rotundo 1993). Steinbeck, however, deconstructs these and other meanings. He suggests that even the interpretations of these words are interchangeable and fluid, changing depending on the context. To elucidate, when Steinbeck provides Lennie with acts of violence and aggression, which are traits of "self-realization" in men and are

viewed positively in the modern context (Rotundo 1993: 285), Lennie is not regarded as a man. While Lennie displays brutality, assault, and emotional detachment in defending himself, his manliness is in suspicion because it reveals irrationality. The narrator describes the fight between Lennie and Curley as follows:

> George ran down the room. 'Leggo of him, Lennie. Let go.' But Lennie watched in terror the flopping little man whom he held. Blood ran down Lennie's face; one of his eyes was cut and closed. George slapped him in the face again and again, and still Lennie held on to the closed fist. Curley was white and shrunken; by now, and his struggling had become weak. He stood crying, his fist lost in Lennie's paw (Steinbeck 1937: 79).

Here, Lennie loses control of his nerves, and the author weakens his manliness despite the character's physical power.

On the surface of the text, the novelist attempts to present a more masculine character by representing Slim, the attractive figure in appearance and personality on the farm. A deeper analysis of his character suggests that Slim is emasculated, embodying a "new masculinity", which is defined as a man's intimacy with other men rather than competing with them (Falabella 2000: 64). Early in the novella, Candy, who works as a cleaner on the farm, describes Slim to George as follows: "Slim's a jerkline skinner. Hell of a nice fella. Slim don't need to wear no high-heeled boots on a grain team. I seen her [Curley's wife] give Slim the eye" (Steinbeck 1937: 29). Slim seems to attract the attention of both men and women. This description aligns with the way the narrator introduces Slim:

> [H]e moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. 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 bull whip without touching the mule. There was 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 (1937: 35).

Slim has the ability to perform his masculinity in appearance, speeches, and behaviours, things that are absent from Lennie's awareness due to his mental condition. For Sandström (2024: 33), using theories of hegemonic masculinity and of homosociality, "*Of Mice and Men* contains a clear masculine identity in the form of Slim". While Steinbeck gives Slim this appearance, the writer still complicates this character's identity as a masculine man.

On the one hand, Steinbeck delineates Slim, as the previous quotes about Slim suggest, with resilience and leadership, features culturally indicative of masculinity. On the other hand, Slim fails to embody basic ideals of masculinity, such as starting a family and demonstrating his commitment as a provider (Rotundo 1993: 2). He also avoids showing any kind of agency or violence in Curley's presence. He appears to be obedient to his life as a worker under Curley's authority because of his class a worker. Furthermore, Slim's supposed masculinity changes by the end of the novella. In the final pages, he becomes concerned about George's sentiments and he tries to console him after George kills Lennie. The narrator describes the situation as follows: "Slim came directly to George and sat down

beside him, sat very close to him. 'Never you mind,' said Slim. 'A guy got to sometimes.'" (Steinbeck 1937: 132). Slim is emasculated here. He is on the edge of a homosexual tendency, especially when he sits very close to George. He tries to justify George's act of shooting Lennie because this violent act paradoxically gives Lennie mercy and escape from the brutality he experienced on the farm. For Slim, George's reaction is a must and a necessary act for a man: 'A guy got to sometimes'(1937: 132). Slim shows emotional empathy for George, as an emotional supporter or a partner. The novelist conflates Slim's rationality and resilience, culturally seen as ideals of masculinity, with contradictory behaviours such as emotionality and solidarity with men. This contradictory conflation complicates Slim's masculinity.

Connectedness, the feminine ideal of cooperation and taking care of one another, such as the initial relationship between George and Lennie, is mixed with confusing masculine qualities such as authority, cruelty, and escape. For example, early in the novel, George gives Lennie a series of orders on how to behave: "Lennie, for God's sakes don't drink so much" (1937: 3); "You gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you?" (1937: 4). George here serves as a partner or a mother raising her child. Paradoxically, by the end of the novel, George shoots Lennie:

> The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering (1937: 132).

This final act by George is confusing. It is kindness disguised as cruelty and meanness, but it is also a way of escape from the responsibility of supporting another man. Emery (1992: 129) suggests that by killing Lennie, George chooses "masculinity" and virility over "femininity" and tenderness, and that George frees himself from the assumption that he is of a "questionable masculinity" because he travels with Lennie as a partner. However, in this seemingly violent act, George still behaves like a mother being cruel in order to protect her child. He is certain that if Lennie is left on the ranch, Curley will mercilessly kill him or mistreat him until Lennie dies quietly, much like Candy's dog or Curley's wife, or even the rats that Lennie unintentionally kills. Thus, George's quest for a sense of masculinity remains contradictory and unfulfilled.

The overall relationship between George and Lennie complicates the meaning of masculinity. On the one hand, it ends with separation and self-centredness rather than intimacy and community contribution, an attempt by George to perform a kind of masculinity. On the other hand, the exact relationship foreshadows another tendency toward homosexuality, which is George's association with Slim, a return to the emasculation to which George was judged of early in the novel. Slim expresses his confusion about the nature of the relationship between Lennie and George: "Slim looked through George and beyond him. 'Ain't many guys travel around together,' he mused. 'I don't know why. Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other.'" (Steinbeck 1937: 36). Slim here alludes to "homophobia", the meaning of masculinity in the modern context that is

men's dread of being emasculated and of being perceived as homosexuals (Kimmel 2006: 5). George, like many Americans in the modern context, seeks to assert his masculinity by escaping the responsibility of supporting Lennie. Kimmel (2006: 6) highlights that men in America tend to gravitate toward securing their masculinity and anchoring their identity as men by "try[ing] to *control themselves*; they project their fears onto *others*; and when feeling to pressured, they attempt an *escape*". The escape George is seeking from Lennie, however, clashes with his status as a single man, a status that arouses the feelings of Slim, another single man.

George's failure to achieve the American dream of possessing a property of his own and of uplifting his working-class status undermines the attempt to anchor masculinity. His work under Curley's supremacy on a classist farm prevents him from meeting his basic needs in addition to his failure to start a family or even get married. This situation is poignantly expressed when George tells Lennie towards the end of the novel, using a childlike narrative: "Guys like us got no fambly. They make a little stake an' then they blow it in. They ain't got nobody in the worl' that ives a hoot in hell about 'em— [...] *But not us*" (1937: 129). In fact, by saying "But not us," George lies to Lennie, masking the harsh reality of their situation as he prepares to shoot him. Here and throughout the whole narrative, George realises the falsity of the American Dream and the difficulty of achieving it under poverty and classism.

The American Dream, which idealises self-making, family life, and "social order" (Adams 1931: 411), is often associated with masculine identity. According to Kimmel (2006: 13), there are three archetypes of manhood: "The Genteel Patriarch", "the Heroic Artisan", and "the Self-Made Man". "The Self-Made Man" archetype is particularly relevant here, as it focuses on achieving economic independence and social status (2006: 14). During the 1930s, the era in which Steinbeck's novella is set, men struggled to secure their identity in the household and maintain their authority in the workplace because of the loss of the breadwinning role (2006: 128). Kimmel (2006: 132) notes, "For most men the Depression was emasculating both at work and at home. Unemployed men lost status with their wives and children and saw themselves as impotent patriarchs". In this context, even when men like George manage to find work, they fail to achieve the American Dream, calling their masculinity into question. These workers' lives are noticeably devoid of family, underscoring the lack of financial support for families. In addition, their common ambition of owning a farm is never fulfilled, underscoring the unattainability of the American Dream and the difficulties of anchoring masculinity under social limitations.

Steinbeck also confuses the masculinity of Curley, the married middle-class man in the novella. The only heterosexual relationship Steinbeck describes in his text is that between Curley and his wife, but this marriage is toxic. Curley's wife, who is never named in the novel as a sign of her oppressed status, confesses her dislike of Curley to Lennie: "I don't *like* Curley. He ain't a nice fella" (Steinbeck 1937: 81). She also says to Lennie, who ultimately beats Curley: "I'm glad you bust up Curley a little bit. Sometimes I'd like to bust him myself" (1937: 85). Her marriage to Curley hampers her dream of becoming an actress, and she seems to be

mistreated by him. Candy tells George about Curley's recent marriage and how Curley keeps pursuing his wife, fearing that she will give the eye to other men:

> 'He got married a couple of weeks ago. Wife lives over in the boss's house. Seems like Curley is cockier' ever since he got married.' George grunted, 'Maybe he's showin' off for his wife.'
> The swamper warmed to his gossi 'You seen that glove on his left hand?' 'Yeah. I seen it.' 'Well, that glove's fulla vaseline.' 'Vaseline? What the hell for?'
> 'Well, I tell ya what - Curley says he's keepin' that hand soft for his wife.' [...]
> 'Well—she got the eye.' 'Yeah?
> Married two weeks and got the eye? Maybe that's why
> Curley's pants is full of ants' (1937: 34-35).

Neither Curley nor his wife are satisfied with their marriage, and their relationship suggests a weakness in Curley's performance of masculinity. He is aggressive with her and jealous that she might be interested in other men, and this insecurity prevents him from being "the Heroic Artisan", the masculine man who never shows injustice towards women or even men (Kimmel 2006: 13). Curley is confused, and to further highlight his complex masculine status, Steinbeck mentions the hand slathered in "Vaseline" to symbolise Curley's femininity and his incapacity to engage in a regular sexual relationship with his wife. This situation further calls into question Curley's virility as a man.

Curley's tiny, womanly physical appearance makes him feminine, stimulates his aggression, and weakens his masculinity. Curley's size, soft hand, and "high-heeled boots" make him look like a woman. Candy describes to George sceptically: "Curley's pretty handy. He done quite a bit in the ring. He's a lightweight, and he's handy [...] He hates big guys. He's all time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy" (1937: 32). This description suggests Curley's fear of being emasculated by stronger men, which explains his hatred of Lennie, whose size and physical strength upset Curley and make him feel inferior compared to men with big bodies. While Curley is the antagonist of the novel, he is also a victim, suffering from "an outmoded masculine mystique", to borrow Friedan's term (1963: 20). He acts violently and forcefully to demonstrate his adequacy as a man, but he still struggles to secure his masculinity, especially when Lennie finally beats him. The narrator describes how Curley feels at that moment of defeat: "Curley sat down on the floor, looking in wonder at his crushed hand" (1937: 79). The soft, broken hand may indicate that Curley is now less feminine, but the fact that Lennie, the physically stronger man, has broken it complicates Curley's sense of being a man.

Curley's middle-class status also undermines his masculinity and renders Curley effeminate and unmanly, an extension of what proletarian writers claim for in the context of the novella. From the nineteenth century to the modern era, including the decade in which *Of Mice and Men* was published, American culture viewed middle-class men as feminine compared to "self-made men" (Armengol,

2014: 59). "The Self-Made Man" signifies a man's masculinity once the man moves upward from one social position to another (Kimmel 2006: 13). For Gold, a proletarian critic and novelist, there is a binary opposition between proletarian writers and middle-class authors. For him, the former are strong and masculine, the latter are soft and feminine (Armengol 2014: 62). While Steinbeck himself belongs to the middle-class, he chooses to represent both types of men, to question the masculinity of a middle-class person like Curley and the masculinity of proletarians like George and others. The author attempts to give a neutral critical understanding of the complex situation that men were living in the 1930s, regardless of their social class. In the novella, Curley fails to meet this requirement of self-making, which is traditionally seen as a masculine attribute. Indeed, Curley comes from a wealthy family, but the wealth belongs to his father, not him; he and his wife live in "in the boss's house" (Steinbeck 1937: 34). He was born but did not become wealthy. He has social status but is not accepted as a self-made man, and thus Steinbeck problematises this character's masculinity despite its middle-class position.

The novelist's portrayal of an African American man enhances the novella's exploration of the fragility of men's masculinity in the Depression, regardless of their social background. Crooks' character suffers from double, if not triple, oppression due to his class and race, a status that disrupts the performance of his masculinity. Crooks is neither married nor provided a family, keeps his distance from others, and feels insecure when whites enter his room. He is introduced as "the Negro stable buck" (1937: 82), who tells Lennie that "Iain't wanted [. . .] 'Cause I'm black" (1937: 84). In his first appearance in the novella, Crooks speaks as if he were a servant under Slim's authority, even though Slim works under Curley's supervision. He says to Slim: "You told me to warm up tar for that mule's foot. I got it warm" (1937: 51). Crooks, here, is two degrees below the other workers on the farm. This status, because of his colour, prevents him from displaying his manliness.

Historically, white supremacy, discrimination, and racism have limited African Americans' opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to function as family providers, achieve independence, and express themselves freely, which are the hallmarks of manhood (Carroll 2003: 15-16). As Carroll (2003: 16) notes, "White middle-class society associated manliness with status as a land owner or sole family breadwinner, but black men were unlikely to secure work that allowed them this status". Certainly, the meaning of African American manhood has changed over the centuries in America. In the nineteenth century, it was about black men owning their own land, and living in harmony with whites without conflicts (2003: 16). Later, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, African American manhood was defined as artistic and racial expression and "social agitation" to challenge racist stereotypes constructed around African Americans (2003: 17). For African American writers, such as Claude McKay, African American struggles over racial identity and masculinity are interconnected. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay writes that his "primitive vitality" and "unwavering strength", traits of African American manhood, were muddled by his "white

education" (McKay 1937: 229). In accordance with this context, Steinbeck captures the difficulty of achieving African American manhood in a white community.

Isolation is Crook's attempt of avoiding disrespect and abuse. But, when white people enter his room and disturb his sense of loneliness, Crooks' struggle with racism, classism, and emasculation deepens. For example, when Lennie, the intellectually inadequate character, enters his room, Crooks confides in Lennie, who does not understand everything he is told, about the discrimination he has suffered since childhood. Crooks recalls the memory:

> 'The white kids come to play at our place, an' sometimes I went to play with them, and some of them was pretty nice. My man didn't like that. I never knew till long later why he didn't like that. But I know now.' He hesitated, and when he spoke again his voice was softer. 'There wasn't another colored family for miles around. And now there ain't a colored man on this ranch an' there's jus' one family in Soledad.' He laughed. 'If I say something, why it's just a nigger sayin' it' (Steinbeck 1937: 87).

This confession comes in a dialogue with Lennie, but the conversation between them fails to flow, especially when Lennie asks, "How long you think it'll be before them pups will be old enough to pet?" (1937: 87). Here, Lennie breaks what Grice (1975: 45) calls "the relation" maxim of conversation because he talks about an unrelated topic. This makes Crooks seems to be talking to himself rather than Lennie, who fails to respond appropriately. Crooks' complaints about discrimination and the oppression he has faced seem to be ignored and dismissed. Lennie has no capacity to fully understand him or empathise with the situation. No other character shows empathy for his situation. Thus, the racism that Crooks remembers while speaking to Lennie remains repressed, hindering Crook's attempt to relieve himself through speech.

Steinbeck illustrates the invisibility that Crooks experiences as a black man in his dialogues with Curley's wife, emphasizing the fragility of his sense of manhood. Crooks, like the other workers, fears that Curley's wife will cause him trouble, which explains why he says to her that he will tell the boss if she does not leave his room. With sarcasm, she threatens and abuses him: "Listen, Nigger[...] You know what I can do to you if you open your trap? [...] I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even so funny" (Steinbeck 1937: 100). The narrator describes how Crooks feels after this verbal racist insult: "Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego-nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, 'Yes, ma'am,' and his voice was toneless" (1937: 100). The absence of "ego", the silence, and the lack of "tone" occur after he is insulted by a woman, the wife of his boss's son. Crooks here faces a deeper level of discrimination, feeling inferior not only to white men, but also to white women.

Crooks' marginalisation is similar to that represented in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, and it brings him close to understanding the realities faced by workers under social constraints. The unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* struggles with social invisibility and recalls moments of racism he encountered as a teenager, foreshadowing Crooks' own struggles. Crooks expresses his personal struggle with loneliness to Lennie: "A guy needs somebody—to be near him [...] a guy goes nuts

if he ain't got no body" (1937: 90). The loneliness, alienation, and rejection Crooks faces render him invisible despite his physical presence in a white community. Yet, this suffering makes Crooks aware of the impossibility of workers achieving the American Dream. When Lennie tells Crooks that he and George want to work toward owing their own farm, Crooks tells Lennie:

> 'you're nuts [...] Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkin' about it, but it's jus' in their head' (1937: 91-92).

Crooks avoids dreaming such a dream, because he is realist and fully aware that he is far from achieving independence and freedom, which complicates his performance of manhood. More than other men on the farm, Crooks remains the invisible, neglected man of this society.

Steinbeck disrupts the masculinity of other male characters, such as Carlson, to invoke the 1930s and its effects on men's lives. Carlson is portrayed as displaying emotional indifference mixed with repressed kindness. For example, early in the novel, Carlson encourages the shooting of Candy's old dog in order to relieve the animal of pain. Ironically, by the end of the novel, Carlson shows a lack of empathy for Lennie's death. He comments sarcastically on George's and Slim's grief over Lennie's shooting, asking Curley: "Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys" (1937: 133). Carlson is clearly insensitive about what happened to Lennie, as he is sarcastic at how depressed Lennie's friends are after the shooting. But, one might suggest that Carlson represses some of the kindness he encodes when he recommends the shooting of Candy's dog. This episode prefigures what actually happens with Lennie, and how the men on the farm hide their kindness behind a mask of cruelty. Living in a conventional "masculine mystique" (Friedan, 1963: 20) has left these men with insecurity and instability. They struggle to maintain traditional traits of masculinity because they live in harsh social conditions, and these conditions weaken their identities, regardless of their class, race, status, ability, and appearance.

5. Conclusion

In his cultural study, "Gendering the Great Depression: rethinking the male body in 1930s American culture and literature", Armengol (2014: 64) argues that "Steinbeck's literature problematizes stereotypical views of the Proletarian male body as hypermasculine (and heterosexual)". Armengol's observation is accurate when we analyse the men and their problematic masculinity in *Of Mice and Men.* We witness the men's paradoxical performance of masculinity throughout the novella. The farm workers including George, Lennie, Slim, and Crooks fear being emasculated by each other, and they do not engage in heterosexual sex or serve as breadwinners or heads of families. Even the boss's son and his practice of power are called into question because his wife is dissatisfied with their relationship, and he relies on his father's wealth. All of the male characters in the examined text are far from achieving the American Dream, the defining characteristic of masculinity since the nineteenth century in America. Steinbeck avoids idealising his male

characters by portraying them as victims and highlighting their various attempts and failures to express their manhood. He challenges the government's masculine tendencies and the "manly" proletarian appeal of the Decade, while also deconstructing the inherited cultural meaning of masculinity. The novelist draws a sophisticated modernist reading of the male experience in the context of the Depression, a time of exploitation and social injustice.

Of Mice and Men demonstrates that in the midst of economic, social, and societal hardship, masculinity is troubled and men struggle but fail to shape their identity as masculine men. Future research should look into expanding the analysis to include more novels from the Decade to examine how socio-cultural circumstances impact men's identities during critical times like the Depression. By placing other 1930s novels in their cultural context and using masculinity studies, one might suggest that the male characters represented in the literature of the 1930s embody contradictory traits. At certain points, they are victimisers. At other moments, however, they are victimised by the difficult contexts in which they lived. Regardless of their race, class, status, appearance, or mental or physical capacity, while living in a challenging context, men fail to secure their sense of masculinity in modern America.

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