



Through the Lens of Things: Three Dilemmas in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Jingting Lan

Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China.

How to cite this paper: Jingting Lan. (2024) Through the Lens of Things: Three Dilemmas in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(6), 1486-1489. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.06.032

Received: May 8, 2024

Accepted: June 6, 2024

Published: July 3, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Jingting Lan, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China.

Abstract

The famous book *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck portrays the hardships of the American working class during the Great Depression. The things are the storytellers who keep the struggles for survival of the lower classes hidden. Steinbeck employed things to highlight the socioeconomic realities of the American Great Depression by bringing the readers back to earth after telling the great tale of the American dream and showing the disillusionment of the American ideal through the eyes of laborers. Things behave as actors in the narrative, affecting or determining the actions and outcomes of the characters while also expressing the American social class system, defining cultural identities, and denoting a person's position in the universe. Thus, this paper explores the significance of things during the Great Depression, looks at the three dilemmas in *Of Mice and Men* from the perspective of things, and infers from things the melancholy of regular people.

Keywords

Thing, Dilemmas, Occupation, Identity, Spirit

1. Introduction

Known as a distinctively American national story, *Of Mice and Men* was one of John Steinbeck's most famous books when he won the Nobel Prize in 1962. The novel chronicles the tragic tale of George and Lennie, two poor immigrant farm laborers who began the American dream with high hopes during the Great Depression and ended it with sadness. Even though *Of Mice and Men* has been thoroughly examined, several aspects still need to be investigated. For instance, not enough research has been done on the deeper significance and purpose of objects in works. Insufficient attention is paid to the dead items in novels in favor of the dramatic elements, themes, character images, and symbolic meanings of sceneries, animals, and characters in novels. In actuality, the elements that emphasize the difficulties faced by the lower classes during the Great Depression also depict the distribution of rights and social classes and provide a hint as to the choices and conclusions that the characters will reach. Consequently, a thorough investigation into the novel from the viewpoint of things is necessary. Furthermore, as the new theoretical writings on matter frequently incorporate elements of narrative, fabulation, or other genres of invention, as Skiveren puts it, a return to materiality has also meant a return to fiction (Skiveren, T., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to look into how social realities and living conditions are portrayed in *Of Mice and Men*.

2. The Dilemma of Occupation

The work cards and the yellow can serve as potent symbols of rootlessness. Prioritize work cards first. "You remember about us going to Murray and Ready's and they gave us work cards and bus tickets (John Steinbeck, 2020)." These cards are testament to the fact that neither George nor Lennie possess a stable residence or employment. During the Great Depression, workers were akin to wandering grasses, swept along by the powerful currents of social change,

with their futures clouded in uncertainty. The second item, a small yellow can, was chosen by George after rummaging through his shelf. This can, left behind by a previous employee named Whitey, a blacksmith who once owned the bed, illustrates the transient nature of the farm's residents. The farmhouse never stands empty, as old faces depart and new ones arrive. Candy's comments further attest to the migratory nature of these workers, as they often provide reasons for leaving the farm, echoing the excuses of those who preceded them. Moreover, the work card and the yellow can also expose the helplessness and confusion that underlie career mobility. Migrant workers often struggle with frequent career changes, and after completing a job and receiving their pay, they may resort to drinking and merriment as a coping mechanism to alleviate their inner turmoil and confusion. This helpless choice not only reflects their inability to secure stable employment but also underscores their perplexity and helplessness in navigating their future career paths.

Low pay and liniments point out the exploitation. Making use of objects to illustrate how the farmer mistreats his employees. First, low wages. "Look, if Lennie and I labor for a month without spending anything, we will have a hundred dollars, says George." Lennie and George earn a total of \$100 each month, or 1.6 dollars per day, between them. The low compensation implies that agricultural workers have no way to improve their lot in life and are not secure in their own existence. Given the unfair basic wage structure, migrant workers are unable to make enough money to improve their living conditions, which leads to a persistent cycle of poverty. The liniment comes next. The pain and stiffness associated with arthritis can be lessened by topically applying a liniment to the affected area. The day he arrived at the property, George placed the liniment on his personal shelf, suggesting that he would use it frequently. Furthermore, Crookes frequently uses the liniment, indicating that accidents involving agricultural laborers were a persistent issue. In the United States during the 1930s, liniment was not only a medical product but also a representation of the severe labor load that the working class was subjected to. Every time a worker rubs their back with liniment, it is a silent protest against hard work and long hours. Many farm laborers have lost their jobs due to increased agricultural mechanization, and those who remain must put up with unfavorable working circumstances in order to make ends meet. It is evident that Candy, the book's old cleaner, lost his right hand while working on a ranch; his story is merely a microcosm of what many laborers of that era went through. Employers brutally take advantage of their surplus value by seeing employees as labor robots.

3. The Dilemma of Identity

Lucas argues that personal apparel is often a medium for creating social identities (Lucas, G. & Robb, J., 2021). As such, it makes sense to utilize clothes as a primary indicator of social status. Farmers and agricultural laborers in particular have created a clear separation through clothing. Wearing similar slacks and coats made of denim with brass buttons, George and Lennie represented their physical labor identities. The landlord's blue denim slacks and flannel shirt are two examples of his unique fabric choices, which reflect his social standing and personal taste. The stark contrast of this type of clothing highlights the difference in socioeconomic status between the two. The differences in clothing draw attention to the material component as well as the way in which companies limit the power of their workforce. Candy claims, "I planted crops for damn near everyone in this state, but they were not my crops," and that the fact that someone is dressed for work indicates that they are employed by someone else. The identities of the employees are withheld in secret. On the other hand, farm owners frequently wear thick-heeled boots as a symbol of their superiority. This visual cue influences employees' sense of value as well as their own sense of worth simultaneously.

Unfair resource allocation is stated by the room arrangement. This reflection was more prominent during the Great Depression when resources were short. The worker dormitories' crude design exposed the living conditions that the lower class faced during the Great Depression. "The bunk house was a long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted." The workers' living quarters are quite cramped and devoid of basic amenities. Their living situation has a profound impact on their quality of life and serves as a stark reflection of the unjust social and economic system. Moreover, there is a visible imbalance in internal labor resources. Crookes has a little room. There was a square four-paned window, and on the other, a narrow plank door leading into the barn. His living quarters appear to be austere. His activity zone was restricted by the little shed he constructed up against the cattle house's outside wall, indicating that he was working and going home without authorization to enter the bunkhouse with other laborers. "The presence of the simplest artifact has the potential to alter the relationships between humans and their environments (Malafouris, L., 2020)". After spending a long period in such a setting, Crookes began to question who he was, and he felt neither respected nor like he belonged.

The speaker of the disparity in cultural rights is the play card. The black community encountered several obstacles during the Great Depression as a result of the country's linked racial tensions and economic hardships. As a commonplace commodity, cards have emerged as a crucial conduit for disclosing cultural rights inequity. While white people are allowed to play cards in dorms, black people—like Crookes—are not allowed to do so because of the color of their skin. Cards discretely split the workplace into two distinct areas. Only white workers can play cards in the workroom, whilst black folks cannot enter to play cards. Crookes once said, "They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black." The statement highlights how widespread racism is. Black laborers use playing cards as a way to fight for their cultural rights, yet skin color issues have grown to be a significant obstacle to their social integration. The oppression of both economic pressure and cultural discrimination has made their marginalization worse. According to Breen, residential segregation resulting from discrimination against blacks and favoritism toward whites offers a proxy measure of racism (Breen, N. & Andres, J., 2024). Consequently, card games have become a microcosm of the identity crisis that Black people experienced during the Great Depression.

4. The Dilemma of Spirit

Things talk about how dreams develop. The dreams of the laborers are reflected in the Western periodical. "Western magazines range men love to read and score at and secretly believe", they serve as a cultural emblem that reflects people's pursuit of dreams and their impotence in reality by preserving communal memories and imaginations of Western mythology and the American Dream. Western magazines offered Americans in dire need a spiritual haven during the Great Depression and revealed a world full of possibilities and dangers. Reading helps people escape from their everyday problems for a while, go on an adventure with the story's protagonists, and find solace. People are persuaded to believe that their aspirations are achievable with courage and hard effort by the American Dream and Western mythology, which Western magazine portrays. But there is also no denying the stark contrast between this perfect world and the real one. The usual examples of this divide are George and Lennie, who have an unbridgeable divide between their aspirations and realities. This disparity was made worse by the Great Depression's social backdrop, and the financial crisis prevented many individuals from realizing their aspirations. Furthermore, western magazine not only captures the helplessness and pursuit of aspirations by individuals, but it also influences this mindset to some degree. The distance between dreams and reality has been cemented by western magazine's constant reinforcement and repetition, turning it into a widespread social phenomena.

Dreamland asserts that goals and aspirations are useless during the Great Depression. Dreamland serves as both a plot device and a metaphor for the struggle between ideals and reality throughout the book. Although it seems powerless in the face of reality, it represents George and Lennie's aspiration for a better life. Their desire to realize who they are is a result of the challenges they have faced in life. However, it is challenging for individuals to realize this desire due to societal and environmental constraints. Dreamland illustrates a typical issue of class conflicts and unfair resource allocation from a sociological standpoint. In sharp contrast to George and Lennie's aspirations, small-scale farming economies have been steadily disappearing as a result of agricultural modernization. This paradox highlights the significant barriers that people in lower socioeconomic classes encounter in their quest for a better life, including social structure, power dynamics, and a lack of resources. Dreamland also symbolizes the way postmodernism examines the interplay between ideals and actuality. Dreamland is an unreachable ideal because George and Lennie's perception of it is constrained by their cultural and historical background. The dreamland gradually grows more distinct and tangible in their hearts over time, yet it is never truly reached. The American ambition of land ownership in the 1930s was in conflict with the mechanization of agriculture, rendering the goal increasingly unattainable. Their internal dissatisfaction and the outside world both contribute to their sense of helplessness. Their struggle and pain are silent accusations of the conflict between ideals and reality.

For both George and Lennie, objects have weaved dreams and broken dreams at the same moment. Weapons are symbols of desperation and violence. It is a symbol of society as well as a reflection of psychology and culture. Every time a gun appears, it signals the beginning of a tragic event or an inevitable clash, emphasizing the challenges and the characters' sense of inner powerlessness and despair. George sees the weapon as a physical representation of his inner hopelessness. He decided to use the pistol as a means of fleeing the many challenges he faced in life, yet this decision did not lead to emancipation but rather drove him farther into a pit of misery. Many individuals lost hope for the future during the Great Depression due to social instability and economic hardships, and the pistol came to represent this hopelessness in concrete form. It is a symbol of both internal conflict and hopelessness in addition to outside aggression. In George's words, "They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and

then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to." The labors he recounted are no different from him, who lost his dream.

5. Conclusion

Steinbeck gives life to seemingly minor items in his writings. They are not just physical entities but also living, breathing examples of civilization and history. Things are full-fledged memories since they accumulate and bring forth how we have materially engaged with them over different timescales (Prezioso, E. & Alessandroni, N., 2023). As so, each object is a participant of the era and carries a great deal of collective memory and history. They convey the tale of societal transformations and laborers' suffering in silence. These items serve as a tangible representation of the power dynamics between labors and capitalists, allowing Steinbeck to expose the struggles and exploitation that labor faces while also subtly alluding to the anguish of the working class. Things also represent cultural rights and social class divisions, highlighting the aspirations of the working class for a better life. Though, the final disappointment portends the terrible fate of the working class, these dreams frequently break in the face of harsh reality, and the changes in objects mirror the course of dreams. During this particular historical period of the Great Depression, items had more cultural and social significance than just being necessities. Steinbeck used objects to give the American Dream ominous tints in order to illustrate the struggles and suffering endured by common people trying to fulfill their dreams during the Great Depression. These objects subtly transmit the weight and vicissitudes of that historical moment, giving readers a viewpoint to properly understand and appreciate it.

References

- Breen, N., Andres, J., Fossett, M., Gomez, M. M., & Moy, E. The Effects of Residential Segregation on Black and White Mortality in the United States [J]. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 2024, 51(1):79-120.
- John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men* [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2020:1-106.
- Lucas, G., & Robb, J. The terrain of thing worlds: Central objects and asymmetry in material culture systems [J]. *Journal of Material Culture*, 2021: 26(2): 219-238.
- Malafouris, L. Thinking as "Thinging": Psychology with Things [J]. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2020, 29(1): 3-8.
- Prezioso, E., & Alessandroni, N. Enacting memories through and with things: Remembering as material engagement [J]. *Memory Studies*, 2023, 16(4): 962-983.
- Skiveren, T. Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter [J]. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 2022, 39(3): 187-202.