



كلية الآداب و العلوم الإنسانية - ظهر المهرارز

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Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines - Dhar El Mahraz

Introduction to Literature (Online lectures)

Semester 4

Professor Hakim

So far, we have studied Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist. We have discussed the following scenes:

1. The Workhouse
2. The Apprenticeship
3. The Journey to London
4. Fagin's house
5. The Court Scene.

Those are the scenes we need to study. We have finished our study of Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist.

We move now from the study of an English writer and English novel, Charles Dickens and Oliver Twist, to the study of an American writer and American novel, John Steinbeck and Of Mice and Men.

Students need to download and watch the movie which is based on John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, (preferably the one directed by Gary Sinise. Or just read the novel itself.

After watching the movie, or reading the novel, students should read the following notes about John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. These notes are organized according to the following outline:

Week 1: Introduction of the novel and discussion of the opening scene

Week 2: Discussion of the opening scene: major characters and themes

Week 3: Candy

Week 4: Crooks

Week 5: Curley's wife

Week 6: The end and the ending of *Of Mice and Men*

Week 1:

Introduction of the novel and discussion of the opening scene

A/ Introduction:

Of Mice and Men, is an American novel written by an American writer, John Steinbeck. This novel presents the conditions of people whom society sees as abnormal; people who are unable to get integrated in society. These are misfits (unable to fit in society) and outcasts (those rejected by society).

What unites these people, whether they are misfits or outcasts, is that they are marginalized.

These people include

1. The mentally retarded: represented in the novel by Lennie
2. The old and physically handicapped: represented in the novel by Candy
3. The Afro-Americans: represented in the novel by Crooks
4. The women: represented in the novel by Curley's wife.

Each of these people / characters stands for / represents a category / a type of people in reality: The mentally retarded, the physically handicapped, the old, the minorities (the blacks), and the women.

We will study each of these representative characters, and the categories they stand for, and then we will move on to study the related themes.

Steinbeck discusses those who are considered to be abnormal, and through them, he presents some very important themes / issues.

B/ Of Mice and Men: The Opening Scene:

In what follows, we will study the beginning of the film: How does the film begin? and why?

In the beginning of the film, the writer creates suspense through:

1. A woman who is running:

she looks scared (her face and the way she runs indicate this); her dress is torn.

It is clear that something very bad happened to her; but we do not know what.

2. Two men are also running and they too look scared (their faces and running show this clearly). We do not know why they are running.

We feel that there is a link between the woman and the two men. But we do not know for sure what that link is.

This scene creates suspense; this makes us curious to know what really happened.

This is a good technique to make us want to continue reading the novel or watching the movie.

So, the opening scene / the beginning of the film has a very important function, which is to create a desire in readers / spectators to read the novel / watch the film.

The opening scene has another function: to introduce characters and themes.

Week 2:

Discussion of the opening scene: major characters and themes

1. Major characters:

Two major characters are introduced: George and Lennie.

a/ **Lennie:**

Physically, he is a very big man. Mentally, he is like a child: what shows this is that:

He always forgets what George tells him.

He asks too many questions (he keeps repeating the same question 'where are we going?' He has no sense of direction.

He cries if a wish is not realized (ketchup) or if something he likes (a mouse, his toy) is taken away from him.

He cannot depend on himself for food and protection.

Steinbeck has given him a significant name; he is called 'small' in the novel: this refers not to his body but to his mind.

He makes a lot of stupid mistakes in spite of George's warning and teaching.

Obviously, Lennie is an abnormal person:

he is mentally retarded, because his mind has not developed in the same way his body has.

His mind has stopped growing in childhood, whereas his body has continued growing up.

Lennie is only one of many abnormal people whom Steinbeck has chosen to write about in his novel.

The second major character introduced in the opening scene is:

b/ **George**: he is the contrast of Lennie. This contrast makes us see Lennie very clearly.

George is clever

He has a very strong sense of responsibility and sacrifice.

How? George says that he could lead an easy and an enjoyable life if it were not for Lennie. He has made a choice to give up a good life to look after Lennie.

In addition to major characters, the Opening scene introduces some major themes.

2. Major Themes:

These are:

a/ Responsibility: towards the abnormal people.

Steinbeck believes that society does not understand abnormal people; so, it marginalizes them. It considers them to be useless.

Through George, Steinbeck wants to say that maybe people should understand these abnormal people and look after them.

Another theme which this opening scene introduces is

b/ Dream: George and Lennie dream of having a little farm of their own where they can be safe and independent.

Safe from trouble: Lennie is a danger to himself and to others. If he lives on a farm, he will be safe.

Independent: they will not need to work, or look for work.

So, the dream offers them a family, company to overcome their loneliness, a future.

Their life will have a purpose.

In terms of structure, George says that in case of trouble, Lennie should come to hide in the place they are in now. This is what will happen.

This gives the novel a circular structure: the story begins and ends in the same place.

The next short scene, when Lennie and George meet the Ranch boss, shows us more about Lennie the child, George the protector, and how society views the relationship of George and Lennie.

Week 3: Candy

This is another person/ character whom society rejects.

The name chosen for this character is ironical; it refers to something sweet, but Candy's conditions and life are not sweet.

We have already seen in the opening scene Lennie who is a mentally handicapped person. He represents those people who have a handicapped brain.

We saw that without George, Lennie would be lost because society does not accept, and does not look after such people.

In the present scene, where Candy appears, we are going to see another person whom society also refuses.

This is because he is, first, too old to be useful;

and second, he is physically handicapped (he has a problem with one of his hands).

These two factors, old age and physical handicap, make him seen by society as useless. If a person is productive, he is accepted, if not he is refused.

He is given a very low job, tending the chickens. He does not work as the others.

He suffers from loneliness, he has no friends and no family.

He is not allowed to participate in his co-workers' activities such as playing cards...

He finds in his dog, the friend, the family which he does not have.

We see that there is a deep affection between the old man and his dog. They have been together for a long time: Candy says that they herded sheep together.

Society does not understand the nature of the relationship between Candy and his dog. For them the dog is old and it stinks; so, it should be killed.

They offer Candy a puppy, a young and healthy little dog, he refuses. His dog is more than just a dog: it is a friend, a companion and family.

Killing the dog is like killing part of Candy: this is why Candy tries to stop them killing the dog; and when he cannot, he suffers a lot.

This is clear in the reaction of his body: hands, face and whole body.

Films communicate their messages in two ways: verbal (meaning language) and non verbal (body language...).

He suffers because he now finds himself more lonely than ever; he also suffers because he regrets deeply that he did not kill the dog himself.

George witnesses this scene and he understands that Candy suffers because he let others kill his dog. George will not make the same mistake. He will kill Lennie himself.

He knows that it is very hard to live with a guilt all his life.

The way Candy looks shows that he is lonely, and useless: he is left behind.

Candy describes the fate of a man after he becomes too old to be of any use : he is dismissed from work, in this way his suffering continues. This is worse than what happens to the dog: it is killed, its suffering stops.

There is an important example of non verbal communication: it is the silence which indicates that that moment is very important: there is a lot of embarrassment.

When Candy hears George and Lennie speak about their dream, he sees an opportunity

- to overcome his loneliness,
- to give his life a meaning by being useful (by contributing money and by helping on the farm),
- to have a family (George and Lennie).

This dream gives Candy's life hope and happiness: he offers to contribute money to the realization of the dream if they accept to let him join them. And they did. The dream provides him with a substitute to the lost dog.

Week 4 : Crooks

This is another character who suffers from rejection by society.

This character is the worst of the three because at least Lennie has George, and Candy had the dog.

The reasons why he is rejected are:

1. His skin color: he is an Afro American.
2. His crooked / handicapped back

So, he has two handicaps: color and twisted / crooked back.

This is why the writer gives him the name 'Crooks'; this means that he is handicapped both in terms of color and back.

The effect of these two handicaps is that he becomes crooked emotionally: full of despair, disappointment and hatred. The way he is treated affects him psychologically.

Both of these handicaps make it impossible for him to fit in society: which is predominantly white, and which considers as useless anybody who has a handicap.

So, society here is presented by Steinbeck as merciless and pitiless and intolerant because it does not accept those who are different and those it considers useless.

This rejection is seen in the job he is given, which is inferior; he looks after mules. He is never allowed to go to the field with the others.

Moreover, he does not participate in the activities of the other workers, such as playing cards or games and going to town in week ends.

This exclusion, or rejection, makes him suffer from loneliness; he does not live with the others in the bunkhouse; he lives alone in a separate room. No one ever visits him.

So, he suffers from segregation.

He considers his room to be a private space which nobody should enter.

He is furious when Lennie comes into his room.

Lennie is the only person who has ever gone to Crook's room

because Lennie is like a child, he does not make any difference between whites and Afro Americans.

When people grow up, they start judging. So, for Steinbeck society teaches people wrong ideas and behaviors.

Crooks tries to relieve his loneliness by reading books.

So, this means he is an intellectual; still, he is not considered as an equal.

But this does not work: he tries to escape into books, but the reality is too hard to escape from.

Steinbeck uses two techniques to make us understand what Crooks really feels.

The first one is when he makes Crooks talk to someone who does not understand (Lennie). It is like a monologue, like speaking to himself. So, he is talking to us not to Lennie.

Writers can present a character in one of two ways:

Describe that character's conditions, personality; or make that character speak about himself directly.

Steinbeck uses the second way:

When he makes Crooks speak directly to us through Lennie who is not the real target: the readers are the intended target since the message is addressed to them.

Because Lennie does not understand, Crooks can speak freely and spontaneously without fearing that he will be punished.

So, what he says is the truth.

This is how Steinbeck makes us understand the feelings and the reality of Crooks.

Another technique Steinbeck uses is when he makes Crooks cause Lennie to be scared. He asks him to suppose that George will go away and never come back again. Lennie got really frightened, and could not imagine his life without George.

This is used by Crooks just to give an idea about his conditions. He has nobody to talk to, or be with, which explains the degree of loneliness he feels.

Through Crooks, Steinbeck presents the theme of racism.

In here, Crooks represents not himself, but Afro Americans in general.

Steinbeck, by discussing the situation of Crooks, he wants to show how Afro Americans are treated by the white community in The USA.

This is also true of Lennie and Candy:

Lennie represents the mentally retarded; Candy represents the old and the physically handicapped.

Steinbeck is not presenting individuals, he is presenting individuals who stand for groups of people who have the same problems.

This idea applies to Lennie, Candy, Crooks and to Curley's wife too,

The latter is going to be the focus of the next scene.

Week 5: Curley's wife

She is given no name.

Sometimes, Steinbeck gives his characters very meaningful names:

Small, Candy and Crooks.

The reason for this is to draw the attention of the readers to these marginalized characters.

This is the aim of the writer: he wants readers to pay attention to them.

Here, with Curley's wife, he uses another technique: no name. Just the possessive: Curley's wife.

What does this mean?

In addition to attracting the attention of the readers to her, he has another aim. When he uses the possessive: Curley's wife, he wants to say that this woman is the possession / property of her husband.

She does not have an independent identity / personality of her own.

She is not free as a person, but she belongs to someone else.

As a result of this, the fact that she belongs to her husband, she cannot find people to communicate with outside her husband.

Curley is very jealous and does not want her to talk to other people.

He considers her his own exclusive possession and he gets furious when she tries to talk to anybody.

The workers in the Ranch do not dare to talk to her because she is the wife of Curley who is the son of the boss.

They are afraid to get dismissed / fired from their job.

This is why they consider her to be a source of trouble and problems; so, they all try to avoid her.

Consequently, she feels insulted / humiliated because she does not see herself as a source of trouble. She is innocent, she is simply trying to find communication.

Moreover, she feels extremely lonely when workers refuse to talk to her.

Her many attempts to start conversation with them fail all the time. She tries to take refuge in music, but her husband breaks all the music disks / records she has.

The only character who 'speaks' and 'listens' to her is Lennie. This reminds us of Crooks: Lennie is the only person who visits, and 'listens', to him.

So, again Steinbeck is using Lennie to make Curley's wife speak about herself indirectly to the readers. The same technique used with Crooks.

Steinbeck does not talk about her himself, he lets her talk about herself.

The result of this technique is that readers understand her fully. This understanding is essential to sympathize with her.

When Curley's wife 'speaks', she mentions the problems she suffers from and which we have just presented:

lack of independence,

lack of communication,

Her feeling insulted (humiliation), and

Her loneliness.

It is clear that from the problems she has, we can conclude that, like Lennie, Candy and Crooks, she suffers from rejection and exclusion.

She lives in a patriarchal society which gives women no freedom or rights.

After talking about her problems, she mentions her dream:

She dreams of becoming an actress. She has met some movie people who have promised to help her realize her dream.

They described her as being natural, meaning spontaneous.

This dream shows that she is unhappy with her life in the Ranch (there is failure in her marriage and in her relations with the workers).

For this reason, we can consider the dream as a means for her to escape from her present conditions. It is also a means to make her have both an identity, fame, and self respect.

But we can see that this dream is only an illusion. So, she will be stuck in the Ranch for the rest of her life.

Steinbeck again, by presenting Curley's wife as a character in his book, does not want us to see her as an individual, but as representative of a group of people.

Like Lennie who represents the mentally retarded, and Candy who stands for the old and handicapped, and Crooks who symbolizes Afro Americans in The USA, Curley's wife is used by Steinbeck to represent women and the bad conditions they suffer from in society in that period, the 1930's.

Week 6: The end and the ending of **Of Mice and Men:**

I/ **The end**: what happens at the end of the story.

A/ Lennie kills Curley's wife.

By killing her, he also kills the dream: it is impossible for the dream to be realized now.

B/ We see some similarities between the beginning of the novel and its end:

The scene at the end is similar to the scene of the beginning of the story: some men running / chasing / trying to find Lennie.

There is also a woman who is the cause of this running: the woman in red dress and Curley's wife.

We see the same place where the story started

We also see a train at the end, exactly as at the beginning.

These similarities indicate that the structure of this story is circular.

Beginning and end are the same.

C/ George prefers to kill Lennie himself

He sees this as his responsibility; he does not want Lennie to suffer; he wants him to die happy.

So, he kills him at the moment Lennie speaks about the dream.

If he lets the others kill him, he will feel guilty all his life, like Candy when he lets others kill his dog.

II/ The ending: the type of end; an end can be happy , tragic, open....

The ending of this story is tragic:

A/ The death of Curley's wife. This is tragic because the woman is innocent; she does not deserve to die like that. Her dream dies with her.

B/ The death of Lennie. This is tragic too. It is the death of an innocent man. He is not a bad person. He does not cause problems on purpose. It is in his personality, he cannot help it.

What contributes to making the deaths of Curley's wife and Lennie tragic is that these deaths happen after we as readers have come to understand and sympathise with them.

C/ The failure of the dream:

This is tragic because it affects the lives of many people: Lennie, George, and Candy.

What is tragic is that the dream is killed at a moment when it has become possible.

The dream fails; this means that people can dream, can make plans, but they cannot control the results. We cannot determine the consequences. This is tragic.

D/ The structure of the story: it is circular which means that nothing happens, there is no change. The beginning is like the end: the men chasing Lennie; the same place, and the train.

In this story the form and content are one: they say the same thing: nothing changes. This is the tragedy of life.

The ending is not completely tragic: there are things which reduce the effect of tragedy.

Lennie's death: it is tragic but it is also a relief. He will not suffer anymore. It is better than being locked up in a cage.

Life must continue in spite of the tragic happening at the end.

The train at the end symbolizes this idea.