

The Structure of Solitude: Ontological and Social Constructions of Isolation in Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men"

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between existential and social isolation in John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," placing the novella within a theoretical framework that incorporates George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist framework, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, and Martin Heidegger's ontology of "being-with" (Mitsein). In Steinbeck's world, which is emotionally and economically devoid, his characters are not just individuals; they are also products of displaced social roles. Here, the novella—which is frequently interpreted through a sentimental or socio-historical prism—is considered as a phenomenological investigation into the impossibility of genuine coexistence in the context of late-industrial capitalism. The ontological and systemic isolation in "Of Mice and Men" is not coincidental.

Contextualizing Isolation

Steinbeck accentuates the dehumanizing consequences of alienation in "Of Mice and Men" by creating a microcosm of America during the Great Depression. The novella appears to be a realistic account of traveling ranch workers in California in the 1930s. Underlying this realism, however, is a structurally encoded loneliness—a type of ontological estrangement in which every character is cut off from genuine reciprocity and social recognition. Here, isolation is not only based on circumstance but is determined ontologically; it is ingrained in the phenomenology of their being and the structural conditions of their existence. The three interconnected theoretical domains of ontological isolation (Heidegger), performative social disconnection (Goffman), and the symbolic absence of the other (Mead) are used in this paper to analyze isolation in the novella.

Heideggerian Ontology and the Fallenness of Being-With

In his book *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger presents the idea of "Mitsein," or "being-with," to describe the essentially social character of "Dasein" (the being for whom Being is a question). For Heidegger, to exist is to live in a shared world of meaning; to be human is to be co-present with others. However, characters in "Of Mice and Men" are separated from this co-presence. Slim's comment, "I hardly ever seen two guys travel together," demonstrates how strange and even suspicious George and Lennie's friendship is. The hands are like that—they just show up, get their bunk, and work for a month before quitting and leaving by themselves (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 39). The predominant ontological condition is "fallenness" (Verfallen), Heidegger's term for inauthentic immersion in impersonal social norms that erode genuine relationships. George's final act of shooting Lennie thus becomes the Heideggerian tragic culmination: the annihilation of the only Mitsein-based relationship in the novella. The act does not restore communal authenticity but confirms its impossibility. George returns to the world of solitary, inauthentic

“Dasein” affirming the novella’s claim that authentic “being-with” is unsustainable under prevailing socio-material conditions.

Goffman’s Dramaturgy: Isolation as Role-Performance Failure

According to Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, which was developed in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959), social interaction is like a play. To gain social acceptance, people play parts that follow predetermined scripts. Nonetheless, Steinbeck's characters are distinguished by their inability to uphold steady front-stage personas. For instance, Curley's wife alternates between performative flirtation and the desperation of her unmet expectations: "I could have made something of myself." Perhaps I still will (Steinbeck, p. 88). She is isolated and ultimately erased as a result of her incapacity to maintain a consistent identity.

Dramaturgical exclusion also applies to Crooks. He plays the part of the resentful recluse, separated from the others both physically and figuratively. However, in a vulnerable moment, he discloses, “A guy needs somebody—to be near him” (p. 73). This admission disrupts his defensive role, exposing the emotional labor required to sustain isolation as a form of self-protection. Goffman’s theory reveals how isolation is not only experienced but enacted—a role necessitated by the failure of other roles to be acknowledged or reciprocated.

Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism and the Invisible Other

A fundamental theory of the self as socially constructed through interaction with others can be found in George Herbert Mead's "Mind, Self, and Society" (1934). According to Mead, the ability to assume the role of the other and engage in introspection is how the self emerges during dialogue. This dialogic structure breaks down in Steinbeck's world. Because the characters are unable to reflect each other's humanity, their identities continue to be fragmented and undeveloped.

Candy's mourning after his dog dies is not just sorrow; it is symbolic disintegration: "George, I should have shot that dog myself." I should not have allowed a stranger to shoot my dog (p. 61). The breakdown of Candy's symbolic identity is reflected in his identification with the dog, an object of pity and obsolescence. In order to validate himself, he invests in George and Lennie’s dream, a utopian enclave of mutual recognition. But that dream, ultimately a phantasm, only deepens his isolation when it dissipates. Curley’s wife remains the ultimate cipher of symbolic erasure. Nameless, silenced, and infantilized, she occupies the margins of the symbolic field. Her death is met not with grief but with pragmatic concern for consequences. She is mourned not as a subject but as a disruption. Steinbeck thus constructs a symbolic world devoid of reciprocal recognition, where the self cannot emerge because the other is either absent or hostile.

Loneliness as Structural Alienation: The Marxist Interlude

Although phenomenological and interactionist interpretations are given preference in this paper, it is important to briefly situate Steinbeck's depiction of isolation within the larger economic system of alienation as proposed by Karl Marx in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." Here, alienation arises from the worker’s estrangement from the product of labor, the labor process, and from fellow humans.

This economic trap ensnares all of the characters in "Of Mice and Men." Their futures are uncertain, their connections are ephemeral, and their labor is temporary. Systemic dispossession is the root cause of

George and Lennie's proletarian fantasy of ownership—land, independence, and permanence. In a setting where exploitation and displacement characterize labor relations, Steinbeck effectively conveys the appearance of solidarity. As a result, the characters' loneliness is systemic, embedded, and not just emotional, in the political economy of dispossession.

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Being-With in a World of Solitary Selves

In addition to reflecting on loneliness, Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" also explores the structural impossibility of "Mitsein"—meaningfully being with others—under the circumstances it portrays. We arrive at a comprehensive understanding by combining Heidegger's ontological estrangement, Goffman's dramaturgical failures, Mead's symbolic fragmentation, and Marx's structural alienation: isolation in "Of Mice and Men" is the ontological and social condition of human life within a collapsing social fabric rather than the result of personal decisions.

The novella's refusal to romanticize loneliness is what gives it its lasting power. It presents the reader with a world where dreams are postponed, roles are unfulfilled, and recognition is thwarted rather than offering redemption through suffering. It serves as a reminder that despite their apparent social nature, humans could end up alone.

Works Cited

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