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# Exploitation and Estrangement of Migrant Workers in a Capitalist Society: A Marxist Interpretation of John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men

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## Abstract

*John Steinbeck, who was deeply influenced by his own experiences with migrant workers, sets Of Mice and Men in a time dominated by capitalism and class differences. The migrant workers in the novel stand for the exploited and alienated working class in society. The aim of the article is to show how the ideologies developed by the capitalist society are inscribed within the workers in the novel. It aims to show how the migrant workers in the novel are alienated and exploited by the capitalist mode. It also aims to prove that Steinbeck, through his characters, attempts to show four characteristics of alienation or alienated labor as mentioned by Marx: workers' alienation from the product; alienation from the act of production; alienation from human essence through alienation from work; and, alienation from fellow workers and the resulting objectification and degradation. Last but not least, the article also aims to show how effectively Steinbeck displaces the center by giving a voice to the marginalized and by denying it to the oppressors.*

**Keywords:** Migrant workers, Alienation, Exploitation, Capitalist society, The Marginalized.

## Introduction

The story of Mice and Men take place in John Steinbeck's birth town Salinas, a municipality in California close to the Salinas River and Salinas Valley. Being born and raised in the heart of an agricultural society managed by capitalism, Steinbeck witnessed first-hand the effects capitalism had on the working class. As a reader, one can see the connection between Steinbeck's stories and his background. Jay Parini, the writer of John Steinbeck: An Biography, explains that Steinbeck searched his life and his personal experiences not only to find inspiration for his stories but also to understand more about himself and his background (Parini 1-3). When Steinbeck wrote Of Mice and Men, he was greatly influenced by his own experiences and personal interactions with migrant laborers. It is through his mythos that the story comes to life and becomes convincing. Those who share Steinbeck's view on the hardships of life or have experienced it themselves can identify with the story and sympathize with the characters. George and Lennie chose migrant labor to escape from capitalist society and to lead a more harmonious life. The article aims to show the way ideologies developed by capitalist society are inscribed within workers, and migrant workers are alienated and exploited by capitalist mode. It also aims to analyze how Steinbeck attempts to show four characteristics of alienated labor, as mentioned by Marx. Last but not least, the article also sheds light on the ways Steinbeck displaces the center by giving a voice to the marginalized and by denying it to the oppressors.

## Inscribing Capitalist Ideas on Migrant Labourers

George and Lennie choose migrant labor to escape from capitalist society and in search of a more harmonious life where they are their masters. They plan to work as laborers solely to accumulate the necessary capital to purchase their farm. Yet, the dream never seems to come to reality due to the demands of migrant labor and capitalistic society's constant exploitation of the laborers. Dunbar and Kravitz explain,

Once workers entered the migrant labor milieu, it was almost impossible to escape it. As there were no labor contracts, a migrant laborer was never certain that the job he/she had was for the entire month and never certain that the wage that was first promised would be given at the end. If somehow one did manage to save money, the alcohol sold by the boss would often be too tempting. (1-2)

Steinbeck captures the condition of migrant laborers of being entrapped in a box labeled "working class," when Curley says in the novel: "I never seen a guy do it," he said. 'I saw guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever(y) time a whore house or a blackjack game took what it takes" (Steinbeck 76). Lennie and George never seem to be able to save enough money for their dream; instead, like other employees, they are stuck in the migrant circle with no possible exit. However, despite the endless hard work, the two protagonists never abandon their dream of a life beyond capitalist society.

The characters in *Of Mice and Men* live in a time where capitalism was at its peak, and class differences were great. You were either a proletariat or a bourgeoisie; there was nothing in between. Ideologies that favored the bourgeoisie were normalized; the proletariat was unconsciously manipulated into living by these ideologies when, in reality, they did not benefit them. George and Lennie, as well as the other workers, work eleven hours a day in poor conditions, without ever questioning it. Capitalist society had normalized long workdays and bad conditions to the degree where the workers expect it. Before George and Lennie arrived at the ranch, they knew what the conditions would be like, how the boss would be, and what type of job they would be doing. They had experienced it many times

before that, and they knew exactly how it would be at the ranch. "Tomorrow we're gonna go to work. I saw thrashing machines on the way down. That means we'll be bucking grain bags, Bustin gut" (Steinbeck 9). Just by seeing the machines used on the ranch, George knows exactly what he will be doing there and what will be expected of him. This demonstrates how ideologies developed by the capitalist society are engraved within the proletariat.

## Exploitation and Alienation by Capitalist Mode

In the Marxist perception of society, the economic structure is the base, and the superstructure that develops from the base is politics, laws, religion, and art. The relationship between the base and the superstructure is not unilateral, but instead, "elements of the superstructure constantly react back upon and influence the economic base" (Eagleton 9). The migrant laborers in *Of Mice and Men* represent the oppressed and exploited working class in society. The laborers are alienated, and through the process of alienation, they are also exploited by the capitalist mode of production, which Marx states are the basic source of alienation and exploitation (Marx 28). Capitalist ideologies in the superstructure are the result of the capitalist mode of production (the base). Marx argues that the act of reducing the laborer to the same level as a commodity is the origin of alienation (29).

In the novel, Steinbeck manages to depict the four features of alienation or estranged labor maintained by Marx:

- Alienation from the product of the workers' labor
- From the process of production
- From human essence
- Of the worker by other workers

## Alienation from the Product of the Workers' Labour

Since the migrant laborer's work is monotonous, the product of their labor (barley) loses its creative meaning, thus becoming alien to the worker. The farmers do not pay attention to the plant (product) they harvest; their mission is to get the job done, and in the end, get paid to make ends meet. Labour has become merely an activity to turn the product

into a commodity. When labor has reached this level, the worker is externalized from the product and is no longer able to identify with it (Marx 29). George and Lennie are forced to work on the ranch for an employer to survive in a capitalist society. The protagonists are subject to alienation from the product that they produce because they cannot relate to it. They are not part of the entire process of labor; they only experience one stage of the process, and therefore are not able to identify with the final product. Having their farm would give them the satisfaction of participating in the entire process of labor and accordingly take pride in their finished product.

### **Alienation from the Process of Production**

Marx declares that the product is the “means of life” produced through labor, but when alienated from the product, the laborer is transformed into “a servant of his object” and loses his/her purpose in life (Marx 29). Being alienated from the product that is produced, the laborer is inevitably alienated from the act of production; labor becomes external. Marx elucidates this concept with the explanation that the worker is not capable of identifying him/herself with the product as it does not belong to him/her, and consequently, the worker becomes miserable at work and feels liberated when not laboring. Forced labor and exploitation result in the workers’ dislike of their labor because they feel isolated and estranged by it as Marx notes:

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions, he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal. (Marx 30)

### **Alienation from Human Essence**

In Marx’s view, when we are alienated from work, we inevitably become alienated from our human essence: “estranged labor estranges the species from man” (Marx 31). The laborers in *Of Mice and Men* are unhappy because, as human beings, they are not designed to be forced to produce

to an extreme degree. They suppress their inner desire to live off nature and are consequently no longer linked to nature. Marx emphasizes the notion that man is part of nature and is created by nature; therefore, when one is alienated from nature, one is also alienated from one’s own “species-being.” (Marx 31) The migrant laborers are estranged from their human essence because they can’t see the purpose of their labor. Their labor does not allow them to utilize nature to satisfy their utmost desires. Instead, labor is a part of the process of the capitalist mode of production where the laborer is reduced to a mere piece of machinery. When a man is estranged from himself, a man also becomes estranged from fellow man:

The estrangement of man, and every relationship in which man [stands] to himself, is realized and expressed only in the relationship in which a man stands to other men. Hence within the relationship of estranged labor, each man views the other by the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker. (Marx 32)

### **Alienation from Fellow Workers**

Marx’s argument is that a man’s perception of ownership is that if something does not belong to a person, then the owner must be another person, which automatically makes the other person hostile and alien (Marx 33). It is at this stage of alienation that workers start to compete with each other, and this competitive work environment is generated by the capitalist lust for profit. As a result of their alienation of themselves, they unconsciously begin treating each other as objects. Workers degrade and objectify each other because it is encouraged by society; capitalist society increases degradation since everyone must have their place in society.

A telling example of this is Crooks’ (the stable black buck) experience of being objectified by the other workers. Even though slavery had been abolished for over half a century, Crooks is still treated as a second-class citizen by both his employer and his co-workers. He explains to Lennie and Candy that in all of his years working on the ranch, he has never had company in his room (except for the boss and Slim). In addition to not receiving any company, his company is not wanted by anyone. He is isolated

and alienated by the others for the simple reason that he is not like them.

Another example where the workers are alienated from one another is their lack of interest in each other — their mission is to get the job done fast. Migrant laborers are notorious for being lonely; they chose not to travel with other workers and prefer the lonely life. Due to false consciousness, the workers are, to a great extent, supportive of the dominant ideology developed by capitalism.

### Giving a Voice to the Marginalised

However, John Steinbeck provides the marginalized with a voice through his novel. Those who otherwise are ignored, alienated, and exploited are given the gift of speech. The two protagonists in the story represent the alienated and exploited proletariat in capitalist society. Like other working-class citizens, George and Lennie live in a society where they are positioned at the bottom of the class hierarchy. They experience all four features of alienation developed by Marx, and through these types of alienation, they experience exploitation by the capitalist society. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck focuses on the marginalized in capitalist society through the use of aesthetic elements. Through a deliberate application of a specific narrative style, language usage, and certain way to describe the characters, Steinbeck succeeds in giving a voice to those relegated to the bottom of society.

There are also sub-narrators in the story who tell stories about their personal lives, thus giving a voice to the voiceless in society. Lennie, who is portrayed as mentally challenged, Crooks the stable black buck, Candy, the old farmer, and Curley's wife, who is always discussed in association with her husband Curley — all of these characters represent the marginalized in society. Steinbeck gives these outcasts a voice by allowing them (unlike the other characters) to tell their own stories. Lennie is not able to tell his own story due to his mental disability; his story is, therefore, narrated by George. When these

characters are allowed to tell their own stories, they become subordinate narrators. The reader can follow the story subjectively, which allows one to relate to the characters and their suffering. Steinbeck's representation of the marginalized in his novel is ideal; the historical setting is fitting (the Great Depression), the setting of the story is realistically fitting for that time (a farm/ranch), and the characters suit the story perfectly. The reader can relate to the characters and sympathize with them as they are presented as ordinary working-class laborers. The characters not only narrate their personal stories but also the story of millions of working-class people. Through *Of Mice and Men*, the marginalized are given a voice, and their struggle is recognized.

### Conclusion

When reading the novel, one is immediately transported through time to a place where universal themes such as alienation and exploitation are central. The way George and the other workers feel about their job and their sense of loneliness are still relatable and relevant today. Marx, I consider, is one of the few who can pinpoint and explain the exploitation and alienation of laborers in capitalism in the most logical way.

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