Like Family: Connection and Alienation in Of Mice and Men

In the classic American novel, Of Mice and Men, John Steinbeck explores the deprivation faced by a generation of men who left home in the 1930’s during the Great Depression. Instead of focusing on the experience of the typical migrant worker, though, Steinbeck develops two characters who fall outside the norm. Most men who left home in search of work—and moved often to find it—were loners without sustained family relationships or friendships. George and Lennie, the main characters in Of Mice and Men, travel around together. George is uneducated but quick-witted and logical; Lennie, who is mentally handicapped, is very strong physically and large enough to intimidate people with his presence, but he avoids conflict whenever he can, often with George’s help.

George and Lennie are bound by circumstances that are, at times, ambiguous. Readers are likely to wonder—at least at the start of the novel—what George gains from the relationship. The mere existence of such a relationship was unusual for the time and setting of the novel, and the differences between the two men lead others to express curiosity or doubt. When another character comments on how strange it seems for George and Lennie to be going around together, George offers the explanation, “I ain’t got no people . . . I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time they get mean.” George’s explanation reveals a key theme in the novel: the lack of human connection eventually makes people “mean.” When human beings live too long as “loners,” they fail to develop the interpersonal skills and relationships that might motivate them to be kind to others.

Through the conflicts that George and Lennie face in the novel, Steinbeck illustrates the social dynamic prevalent among the population of men set adrift by the Depression and how that dynamic can affect their development from young men (many were teenagers when they set out) to adults. Without the opportunity and motivation to develop human connections, many develop pervasive feelings of distrust: “Ain’t many guys travel around together. I don’t know why. Maybe everybody in whole damn world is scared of each other,” another character, Slim says, when he explains to George how he sees the drifters come and work for a month or two and move on. According to Slim, quick tempers are the result, along with an orientation toward violence as a solution to any interpersonal problems that arise: “Yeah, they get mean. They get so they don’t want to talk to nobody.”

George and Lennie’s relationship is not only unusual—it’s also complicated, in the way that family relationships typically are. As George’s character develops, the depth of his and Lennie’s connection becomes clear, as his voice “[takes] on the tone of confession.” When George describes the times when the two men first traveled together, he confides

*Made me seem . . . smart alongside him. I had fun. Why he’d do any damn thing I tol’ him, If I tol’ him to walk over a cliff, over he’d go. That wasn’t so much fun after a while. He never got mad about it neither.*

In this passage, George’s description of the friendship’s evolution reveals a dynamic in which the other’s feelings are more accepted and understood. At some point in their history together, Lennie’s emotional reactions to events become important to George and begin to figure into his decisions.
George is also burdened by his sense of responsibility to Lennie, but he seems to feel that the situation is necessarily permanent. Gradually, mostly through George’s monologues, the reader learns that George has become frustrated and annoyed by the arrangement. George complains, “God, you’re a lot of trouble... I could get along so easy and nice if I didn’t have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl.” Later, though, when explaining to Lennie how their life will one day be, he ends his speech with “because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you and that’s why.”

When Steinbeck reveals how George and Lennie’s companionship began, as the outgrowth of a family connection and George’s sense of responsibility, readers begin to understand just how extensively the two men differ from the stereotype of the drifting, solitary migrant worker. We see how their need to protect their relationship drives their thoughts and actions.

George’s treatment of Lennie seems similar to how many siblings treat each other. When George is alone with Lennie, he is abrupt, honest and, at times, abusive in his manner of speech. When conflicts arise between the two men and others they meet while traveling, both George and Lennie are cautious and quiet—skeptical of other’s intentions. When a conflict threatens their relationship, though, George rushes to Lennie’s defense and is protective. When the boss’s son, Curly, threatens Lennie, George complains, “He don’t have to take after Lennie. Lennie didn’t do nothing to him. What’s he got against Lennie?”

As the conflicts become more intense, Lennie, who operates more on intuition than logic, expresses similar intensity when his usual trust in George’s better judgment is threatened by overwhelming feelings of fear and dread. He tries to express his misgivings in a way that will convince his sole ally: “I don’t like this place George. This ain’t no good place. I wanna get outa here.” Still, Lennie is unable to leave the ranch without George.

It seems at first that Lennie needs George much more than George needs Lennie. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes more evident that George is just as reliant on Lennie’s companionship for stability, and that he is often reassured by Lennie’s simple orientation to life. Eventually, the friendship becomes a matter of personal salvation for George: he finds purpose in his responsibility to Lennie and believes that taking care of Lennie can, and will, make him a better person. This familial bond prompts George to see beyond their immediate circumstances and, in the end, to make a very difficult decision about what is best for Lennie.

Throughout the story, all of the characters convey a sense of loneliness and desperation, needing to reach out to others but unable to do so successfully. What finally emerges is a sharp contrast between those who understand the importance of connection and their ability to find compassion for Lennie and those with barriers to this understanding—the same men who are quick to condemn. Steinbeck draws these lines to suggest that those deprived of human connectedness are, over time, ill-equipped to evaluate questions of morality with empathy, which makes them, according to Steinbeck, immoral.