



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

JOHN STEINBECK

OF MICE AND MEN

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Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, JOHN STEINBECK grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast—and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a laborer and journalist in New York City and then as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two California fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed courses regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the California laboring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon Is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *A Russian Journal* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burning Bright* (1950), and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) preceded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he traveled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966), and the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!* (1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), and

Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1989). He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

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BY JOHN STEINBECK

FICTION

Cup of Gold
The Pastures of Heaven
To a God Unknown
Tortilla Flat
In Dubious Battle
Saint Katy the Virgin
Of Mice and Men
The Red Pony
The Long Valley
The Grapes of Wrath
The Moon is Down
Cannery Row
The Wayward Bus
The Pearl
Burning Bright
East of Eden
Sweet Thursday
The Winter of Our Discontent
The Short Reign of Pippin IV

NONFICTION

Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research
(in collaboration with Edward F. Ricketts)
Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team
A Russian Journal *(with pictures by Robert Capa)*
The Log from the Sea of Cortez
Once There Was a War
Travels with Charley in Search of America
America and Americans
Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters

PLAYS

Of Mice and Men
The Moon Is Down

COLLECTIONS

The Portable Steinbeck
The Short Novels of John Steinbeck
Steinbeck: A Life in Letters

OTHER WORKS

The Forgotten Village (documentary)
Viva Zapata! (screenplay)

CRITICAL LIBRARY EDITION

The Grapes of Wrath (*edited by Peter Lisca*)

JOHN STEINBECK

***Of Mice
and Men***

With an Introduction by

SUSAN SHILLINGLAW

PENGUIN BOOKS

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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014
penguin.com

First published in the United States of America by Covici, Friede, Inc. 1937
Published by The Viking Press 1938
Published in a Viking Compass edition 1963
Published in a volume with *Cannery Row* in Penguin Books 1978
This edition with an introduction by Susan Shillinglaw published in Penguin Books 1994

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Ebook ISBN 9781440633904

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Steinbeck, John, 1902–1968.

Of mice and men/John Steinbeck; with an introduction by Susan Shillinglaw.
p. cm.

ISBN 0 14 01.8642 5 (pb.)

1. Cowboys—California—Salinas River Valley—Fiction. 2. Men—California—Salinas River Valley—Fiction. 3. Salinas River Valley (Calif.)—Fiction. 4. Friendship—Fiction. I. Title.

[PS3537.T323402 1994]
813'.52—dc20 93—11712

Cover design and illustration: Heads of State

Version_7

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INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck celebrated friendship, both in his life and in his fiction. Before he began to write each morning, he frequently scrawled letters to friends, and these voluminous pages, many unpublished, map the contours of his life and art. Friendship is the most enduring relationship in his best work, a fact that places him solidly in a long tradition of American writers who send male duos into uncharted terrain. But Steinbeck's vision of camaraderie is less markedly an escape from marriage, home, and commitment than an exploration of the parameters of society and self. "In every bit of honest writing in the world," he noted in a 1938 journal entry, ". . . there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other." These words shape his long career, indeed echo in his acceptance speech for the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature. Steinbeck's greatness as a writer lies in his empathy for common people—their loneliness, joy, anger, and strength, their connection to places and their craving for land. *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, arguably the best of his short novels, owe much of their appeal to Steinbeck's ability to orchestrate this thematic complexity within the context of the abiding commitment between friends that is love at its highest pitch.

To make that statement is to tread perilously close to the precipice of sentimentality, a charge critics frequently level against Steinbeck. Edmund Wilson, for one, declared in a 1940 essay that the author's characters were more nearly animal than human, a cry taken up through the decades. Hostile critics—and Steinbeck's novels inevitably drew richly divided responses—asserted that the emotions his works solicited were excessive and melodramatic, certainly too intense for his simply drawn characters. However, the feelings evoked in Steinbeck's best fiction are controlled by a tight, objective style, and they are sustained by the author's awareness of the genuine loneliness and tragedy of dispossessed Americans. To read *Of Mice and Men* as Steinbeck intended is to keep firmly in mind its original title, "Something That Happened," a phrase expressing the non-judgmental

acceptance that imprints his best work of the 1930s and early 40s. In the novel Steinbeck in effect tells us that this is the way things are; he called his approach non-teleological thinking, or “is thinking.” The term non-teleological was coined by Steinbeck’s best friend, Edward F. Ricketts; and as the two men articulated their shared philosophy, they emphasized the need to see as clearly as a scientist: that is, to accept life on its own terms. “Is thinking” focused not on ends but on the process of life, the Aristotelean efficient cause of nature. When reading *Of Mice and Men*, we are asked to acknowledge the inevitability of a situation in which two men, each with a particular weakness and need, cling to the margins of an unforgiving world. It is a parable about commitment, loneliness, hope, and loss, drawing its power from the fact that these universal truths are grounded in the realistic context of friendship and a shared dream. It is the energy of that friendship, real but hardly sentimental, that charges this richly suggestive and emotional text.

Of Mice and Men is the middle book in Steinbeck’s trilogy about agricultural labor in California. He began the manuscript in the early months of 1936, shortly after completing his impressive strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, and immediately before beginning in the fall of 1936 the research that resulted in the March 1939 publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, his most enduring novel about the Dust Bowl migrants in California. The flanking texts are, as suggested by their titles from *Paradise Lost* and *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, epic responses to the acute problems of farm labor in California, where large-scale farms had long demanded a population of itinerant laborers to harvest seasonal crops. The scope of California’s labor problems seemed to demand such vast canvases. In the 1930s tensions mounted between the state’s agribusiness and the underpaid, oppressed, nearly invisible agricultural laborers. Strikes broke out early in the decade, and communist labor leaders moved in to organize workers. From 1935 to 1940, exiles from the drought-plagued Southwest poured into the Golden State, drawn by Americans’ long-held conviction that the West was the promised land—the place to begin anew—and by the more concrete expectation of employment in the orange groves and lettuce fields. More than 350,000 Dust Bowl exiles from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas came to California in the 1930s, and the state’s agribusiness simply could not employ all these refugees, even on the vast tracts of land that produced much of the nation’s food supply. So from the mid-1930s until 1940 (when many unemployed workers began finding jobs in the burgeoning defense industry), the migrants moved restlessly up and down the state, waiting for crops to ripen, longing for work. The year 1936 was, in fact, about the time that many resident Californians began waking up to the acute problem on their hands: the steady influx of white families who were homeless, hungry, poor but proud.

The book that Steinbeck wrote that year, however, is not about the resistance of California's landed elite to the economic threat the newcomers posed, nor is it about the refugees from the Dust Bowl states who camped beside roads, in overcrowded Hoovervilles, in filthy camps, scratching out a new beginning. *Of Mice and Men* is in one sense an anachronistic text, insisting on its artistry, not its historicity. Never a true social chronicler, Steinbeck deliberately de-historicizes each novel of the late 1930s. Although he began *In Dubious Battle* with the intention of writing a "biography," more or less, of fugitive communists hiding out in nearby Seaside, it evolved into the troubling saga of the farmers' intransigence poised against the labor organizers' ideological fervor and psychological dislocation. Ambitious and honest, the novel presents what Steinbeck called an "unbiased picture" of a strike; and it remains the preeminent proletarian strike novel of the 1930s. *The Grapes of Wrath*, the product of painstaking research (three years of interviews, trips to California's Central Valley, and perusal of government camp reports), is not a realistic novel nor a historical record of an era. It charts the daily agony of the dispossessed as a mythic quest for an Edenic land, for a human community. Although readers continue to strap Steinbeck to the Procrustean bed of realism, he simply will not fit. Steinbeck ignores, for example, the ethnic diversity of the laborers as well as the presence of women labor organizers, even though one resolute young woman, Caroline Decker, played a key role in strikes of the early 1930s. All three texts are, in fact, far more consciously symbolic than historic, as Steinbeck fully recognized. Shortly before beginning *The Grapes of Wrath*, he voiced his artistic credo in his journal. The committed writer, he asserted, must not become ensnared in political ideologies:

Communists are devils who want to steal the little stucco house of the grocery clerk and rationalize his wife and steal his children for a state baby factory. . . . Industrialists are fat greedy, cruel beasts who take pleasure in bombing their workers. The paralysing process is well along. In Spain the loyalists are shooting rifles at the figure of Christ, if you are an insurgent, and the insurgents are shooting babies [sic] if you are a loyalist. The pressure will come fast now. Some writers will get caught in the process, will write tellingly in aid of the process and when it is over they will come back to consciousness groggy. . . . Others will stand clear, carrying on their ancient cry. Try to understand each other. You can't hate men if you know them. These latter will be silenced. This is no recommendation that you follow the last course. You will do it because that is your craft, that is what your lives are about.

In *Of Mice and Men* Steinbeck certainly “stands clear,” achieving artistic control in part by detaching his story from the labor unrest of the 1930s and envisioning a less turbulent era when tramps roved about the state, when work in the vast wheatfields and groves was plentiful. Only in what Steinbeck called the “tone to surround the whole,” the “wall of background,” does the text resonate with a historical moment. From the 1870s until about 1930, California’s wheat and fruit crops were harvested in large part by itinerant workers, mostly single men for whom roving became habitual. Some toted blanket rolls or bindles on their backs; others slept unprotected in the roadside “jungles.” Wages were low, living quarters squalid, and opportunities for advancement practically nonexistent. Even the most resolute and ambitious worker typically met with failure and perforce took to roving. One study concluded that about twenty-five percent were feebleminded, forced out on the road. To be a farmworker was to be among California’s dispossessed, a powerless, degraded, ill-paid fraternity. “It is the constant craving for human company, for friends, that is so strong among the floating class,” noted researcher Frederick C. Mills in a journal kept early in the century. “Denied wives, or families, or circles of sympathetic friends, this feeling can only be partially satisfied thru the institution of ‘partners.’ Most men hate to travel alone on the road.” The isolated and rootless existence of the itinerant is the historicity that Steinbeck represents.

Certainly he would have been familiar with the loneliness of the working stiff. Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, Steinbeck grew up in one of the richest agricultural valleys in California, where lettuce, sugar beets, broccoli, and strawberries were (and still are) harvested in abundance. In high school and college he worked in the fields and packing plants, listening to the stories and absorbing the speech of the working man. For nearly two years in the early 1920s, after dropping out of Stanford University, he roved the California valleys, finding work on ranches owned by Spreckels Sugar, a company that controlled huge tracts throughout the Salinas Valley. Many Spreckels workers, like George and Lennie, were sent from ranch to ranch to help harvest both wheat and sugar beets (and, like George and Lennie, sought work at employment agencies similar to Murray and Ready in San Francisco). Indeed, the episode that inspired *Of Mice and Men* probably occurred on one of these ranches. Working as a bindle stiff himself in the early 1920s, Steinbeck saw a huge and troubled man kill a ranch foreman. “Lennie was a real person,” he told a *New York Times* reporter in 1937. “He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn’t stop him until it was too late.” It was the kind of episode

that Steinbeck filed for later use, a vivid incident with wide-ranging implications.

He filed it away during the dozen years of his apprenticeship, from his college years to his midthirties, when he scratched out a living writing mostly about Californians and their land, ordinary people whose dreams of secure happy homes in the paradisaical West were often blasted. Although in the early 1930s he published three novels—*Cup of Gold* (1929), *To a God Unknown* (1933), and *Pastures of Heaven* (1932)—and wrote his finest short stories, he did not score his first financial coup until 1935, with *Tortilla Flat*. A successful career was thus launched by a collection of wry tales about Monterey's paisanos, told in a voice that mimics their native Spanish. He was thirty-three years old. For the previous five years, he and his creative, resourceful wife, Carol, had been living in the Steinbeck family summer home in Pacific Grove, a seaside community abutting Monterey. In the first half of the decade, Carol worked sporadically, John wrote, and the two lived meagerly on her irregular wages and \$25.00 per month supplied by his supportive parents. But with the \$4,000 paid him for the film rights to *Tortilla Flat*, the Steinbecks for the first time felt free of financial worry. In the fall of 1935 they traveled to Mexico, a country both had longed to see. A few months later, with *In Dubious Battle* a bestseller as well, Carol drew up plans for their first home, to be constructed in Los Gatos, a village sixty miles away in the verdant Santa Clara Valley. *Of Mice and Men* was thus the first book Steinbeck began with a sense of artistic independence born of personal security. "Maybe with this security," he wrote to his literary agent, Elizabeth Otis, late in 1935, "I can write a better book. Maybe not. Certainly though I can take a little longer and write a more careful one."

Yet whatever his intentions, the book, begun in the small house in Pacific Grove and completed in the new Los Gatos bungalow, was not composed in tranquillity. (Indeed, few of Steinbeck's works were.) Even when well into the manuscript, his confidence wavered. "There are problems in it, difficult of resolution," he wrote in his journal shortly after moving to the new house. "But the biggest problem is a resolution of will. The rewards of work are so sickening to me that I do more with the greatest reluctance. The mind and will must concentrate again and to a purpose." It is a startling confession to be made by a successful writer, as Steinbeck's authorized biographer Jackson Benson has noted. Even when financially secure, Steinbeck wrote out of a kind of liminal zone: on the one hand confident in his art, secure in his expression; while on the other doubtful of his abilities, puritanically wrestling with a sluggish will. Over and over in the journals he kept while composing his novels, he records his angst, easing the self-doubt, so it seems, in the very process of writing the revelatory words: "It is strange how this goes on. The

struggle to get started. Terrible. It always happens. . . . I am afraid. Among other things I feel that I have put some things over. That the little success of mine is cheating. I don't seem to feel that any of it is any good. All cheating." And after that cleansing passage, he moves into the text of *Mice*, marshaling that entropic will: "I can do anything when my will is clean and straight. Anything." For John Steinbeck, who had determined as a high-school sophomore that he would be a writer and who had not published his first book until nearly fifteen years later, writing was a matter of discipline, of goals set and doggedly achieved. The seemingly effortless prose, so lucid, straightforward, and suggestive, was mastered through many years of apprenticeship and months of plain hard work. Writing was Steinbeck's passion and his livelihood, but it was also a perpetual challenge. Indeed, his Promethean efforts to launch each text may serve as an object lesson for would-be writers: The graceful and polished prose in *Of Mice and Men* was written quickly, with great relish in its artistry, and with few deletions or changes made to the manuscript (only a fragment of which remains). But Steinbeck, even with public recognition, also wrote with a considerable degree of anguished doubt about his own creativity.

So why write this small, tight, backward-looking novel in the teeth of the Great Depression? The answer has, I believe, two parts—one formal, one thematic. Throughout his career, he viewed each book as an experiment, a chance to turn to a new subject or try his hand at a new form; for *Of Mice and Men* he created his own genre, the play/novelette. "The work I am doing now," he wrote to his agents in April 1936, "is neither a novel nor a play but it is a kind of playable novel. Written in novel form but so scened and set that it can be played as it stands. It wouldn't be like other plays since it does not follow the formal acts but uses chapters for curtains. Descriptions can be used for stage directions. . . . Plays are hard to read so this will make both a novel and play as it stands." Anticipating the postmodernists, Steinbeck was to declare with greater and greater frequency in the late 1930s and '40s that the novel was dead, whereas the theater was "waking up," was fresh and challenging. *Of Mice and Men* is thus poised on the cusp of two genres, one moribund, the other alive. And perhaps Steinbeck's intentions are best appreciated with this point in mind. The play/novelette is his democratic chant, a hybrid that embraces an elite and popular audience, perhaps as fully an American genre as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. As a novel, he believed, the work was more accessible than a drama, easier to read. Furthermore, as he noted in a 1938 article written for *Stage* magazine, the novel form permitted sophisticated treatment of character and subtle descriptive passages, the signature of his best fiction. And the novel allowed for richer tonality, something "vastly important" to Steinbeck, "a sense of the whole much more complete" than

possible in drama. On the other hand, “in a play, sloppy writing is impossible.” A play for a 1930s audience demanded a tight focus—for even tighter times—as he noted in a journal entry that preceded his first attempt at play writing, the unpublished fragment called “The Wizard,” drafted in 1932: “We are in a depression. Therefore my play will have only two main characters, two minor characters, and two supplementary.” *Of Mice and Men* is similarly compressed. To write for the theater was to be acutely aware of audience, their emotional response to the stage and the experience of feeling “yourself drawn into the group that was playing.” Steinbeck’s new genre thus allowed him both to trace fine details of expression appreciated by a reading audience and to paint an intensely realized parable for the theatergoer. He could be both symbolic artist and disciplined craftsman, a writer for the sophisticated and for the masses. The playable novel—a form he would often return to during the next ten years (the aborted *God in the Pipes*, *The Moon Is Down*, *Burning Bright*)—was the “vehicle exactly adequate to the theme,” he wrote a friend, the ideal genre for an author who long sought both a tight surface and depth of meaning, who wrote a taut, accessible prose resonant with meaning on several “levels,” as he frequently noted of his books.

If the desire to experiment with form drove Steinbeck in a new direction after *In Dubious Battle*, the desire to recast the subject of that long novel was an additional impetus. For him, anxiety of influence meant wrestling not with other writers’ creativity but with his own output. *Of Mice and Men* is a compact and, in its origin, a highly personal response to the powerlessness of the California laboring class, the kind of focused study that he often wrote after long books, as if he needed to take stock, to slow down, to look closely. As he composed it, he told book dealer Ben Abramson that the text “hasn’t the weight of I.D.B. It had no intention of having. Entirely different sort of thing.” It’s a highly characteristic remark. Steinbeck’s oeuvre has a remarkable range because he ceaselessly experimented with genres, with subjects, with techniques. Thus, while the strike novel had been a fully orchestrated study of working men manipulated both by the communists who organized them and the farmers who exploited them, *Of Mice and Men* registers the intimate lives of the workers who were the largely nameless victims in the earlier book. It is, as the last names of the two tramps playfully suggest, Milton/Small, a microcosmic response to the epic *In Dubious Battle*, playing off the unresolved sociopolitical clashes of the earlier text with an intimate parable about the psychological disaffection of the marginalized class. To home in on the working man’s plight, Steinbeck rewrote the scene that he had witnessed ten years earlier. What he saw was the clash between a troubled worker and his boss, between the powerless and the elite. What became the climax of his fiction was a confrontation between two of the disenfranchised—Lennie and Curley’s

lonely wife—a conflict whose meaning is less concerned with the cause of oppression, class conflict, than with the very tenor of that oppression. *Of Mice and Men* is a “portrait in ivory” of a highly representative working class enclave, where the laborers’ own powerlessness results in social instability. It is a world where personal interaction is marked by instances of petty control, misunderstanding, jealousy, and callousness. The political reality Steinbeck examined in *Of Mice and Men*, set a “few miles south of Soledad”—Spanish for “solitude”—is the intense loneliness and anger engendered by hopelessness.

Indeed, throughout the novel Steinbeck consistently mutes conflicts between the elite and the powerless, the focus of his previous text. Gestures of political and social power are diffused or checked: the posse commitatas’ fury, both at the beginning and the end; the Boss’s anger at the tardy arrival of Lennie and George; Curley’s simmering frustration. The opening scene insists on this narrowing, as Steinbeck introduces his two tramps in a landscape that conveys both their intimacy with nature and their exclusion from any real power. Although the richly suggestive first paragraph takes note of the “strong and rocky Gabilan mountains” looming above the glade—mountains that throughout the first and last chapters catch the evening light—our eye is brought to dwell on the darkening enclosure by the Salinas River, to focus on a pool where life rises momentarily to the surface, then sinks to the depths. The novel too spirals into darkness as light repeatedly fades, as vitality is snuffed. For a moment, before George and Lennie break through the brush, Steinbeck stops the action, intensifying this concentration on the circumscribed space. Silences throughout the text—most notably in the barn after Curley’s wife is killed—contain the reader within tight places. Although some critics have objected, with V. F. Calverton, to the “exasperatingly artificial structure of the plot,” most have recognized that the dramatic structure demands scenic compression and the message a circumscribed world. The tight scenes suggest the men’s entrapment. This narrow, focused, and, as Steinbeck admitted, “difficult” study allowed him to show that workers destroy themselves not through external conflicts but through their own disaffection. The spiral downward that so many wanderers played out in their own lives is imaginatively recreated in the troubled interplay among the central characters.

When Steinbeck sent *Of Mice and Men* off to his agents in the late summer of 1936, they were disappointed in its narrow scope. “I’m sorry that you do not find the new book as large in subject as it should be,” he wrote back. “I probably did not make my subjects and my symbols clear. The microcosm is rather difficult to handle and apparently I did not get it over—the earth longings of a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men.” If the scope is restricted, the implications are, as

Steinbeck knew, universal. For against the loneliness of each misfit in the novel—a cripple, a black man, a woman, the little-man George, and the leonine Lennie (“one of those whom God has not quite finished,” as Steinbeck describes the creative imbecile in *The Pastures of Heaven*)—is the friendship and dream of Lennie and George. The quality of that uneasy yet unflinching friendship is the “momentary stay against confusion,” in the words of Robert Frost, that makes existence in a grim world meaningful, if only fleetingly so. Their bond is broadly symbolic, their allegorical potential, observes Peter Lisca, “limited only by the ingenuity of the [reading] audience.” Within the novel, however, their symbiotic dependency is hardly understood. Indeed, the final line is Carlson’s, a man of such myopic vision that he cannot possibly comprehend the series of events leading to George and Slim’s final exit: “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?” Like the end of *Billy Budd*—where Billy’s remarkable existence is only partially translated into ballad and journalistic prose—Carlson’s myopia must be supplemented by the reader’s understanding. “Something That Happened” is resolved not in what the characters do next, not in an order imposed on life, but rather in the reader’s comprehension of the doomed appeal of Lennie and George.

That appeal is shaped both by their friendship and by their dream. The title that Steinbeck finally selected underscores the unpredictability of existence as well as its promise, Lennie and George’s blasted dream to “live off the fatta the lan’.” Taken from a poem by Robert Burns, the novel’s title suggests the transitory quality of even “best laid schemes.” The poem tells of an unfortunate field mouse whose home is flattened by a plow:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men

Gang aft a-gley
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain
For promised joy.

As fully articulated only at the beginning and the end, their dream is the terse play within the play, with George the polished actor reciting his lines and Lennie the entranced audience. Each has a role in the recitation that lends a stately dignity to the two tramps as well as the book itself. At first it seems an impossible vision that exists only in the mind, only in the incantatory words that George repeats to Lennie. But land ownership becomes a real possibility. Candy has the money, George has selected the site, and the four eager laborers have divvied up chores. It is perhaps the nearness of resolution that

makes that vision, the text itself, indeed nearly all of Steinbeck's books, so universally appealing. "My earliest memories," he wrote to a college friend in 1924, "are of my mother's telling me how men could become bright shining creatures with great white wings and all through the chanting of simple incantations." To greater and lesser degrees, residual strains of that romanticism cut through Steinbeck's work, particularly in his apprentice fiction. The story of his early years charts his gradual ability to use rather than to be controlled by that romantic impulse. By 1936, in what many critics declare his best novel, *Of Mice and Men*, the writer had mastered his craft and had discovered a voice for his unflinching faith, not in progress, but in human potential.

Covici-Friede published *Of Mice and Men* on February 25, 1937, priced at \$2.00 a copy. A Book-of-the-Month Club selection in March, it sold briskly (average sales of a thousand copies a day in the first month), and in company with *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *Gone With the Wind* it hit bestseller lists around the country, firmly establishing Steinbeck's growing reputation. Critics read the book with almost universal enthusiasm. *Of Mice and Men*, wrote Henry Seidel Canby for the *Saturday Review*, "should please everybody because it has every element of good storytelling, and . . . most of our successful novels of recent years, with any substance of art to them, have succeeded by violating most of the canons of the storyteller's art in order to emphasize ideology, the stream of consciousness, or behaviorism." Steinbeck was lauded as a proletarian writer with a rare "quality of mercy in depiction of the small man." It is his "compassion," noted Lewis Gannet, "that marks off John Steinbeck, artist, so sharply from all the little verbal photographers who . . . snarl in books." That summer the "playable novel" was performed as written by the Theater Union of San Francisco, the production opening to favorable reviews on May 21, 1937, and running for two months. Steinbeck's experiment with novel-as-script, however, must be judged a failure; editing for a powerful New York stage version proved necessary. When, a few weeks after publication, George Kaufman showed interest in producing *Of Mice and Men* on Broadway, he wrote to Steinbeck suggesting several changes: Curley's wife, he noted, "should be drawn more fully. . . . She is the motivating force of the whole thing and should loom larger. Above all, it seems to me to be vital that the Curley-Lennie fight be because of the girl."

While Kaufman's suggestion violated the integrity of a highly naturalistic text in which no one person is responsible for the outcome, he nonetheless identifies the character who, with Crooks and Candy, completes the circle of loneliness, a woman whose unbridled energy finds form in the only role she knows, that of a sexual tease. (She most definitely is not a "harlot" or, in the words of Joseph Wood Krutch, a "nymphomaniac") In the novel Steinbeck

treats her tenderly when she finally tells Lennie “her story” in a “passion of communication.” As rewritten by Steinbeck and Kaufman, however, Curley’s wife better articulates the emptiness feared by nearly every character: “Sure I got a man,” she tells George in a speech inserted shortly after Candy’s dog is shot. “He ain’t never home. I got nobody to talk to, I got nobody to be with. Think I can just set home an’ do nothing but look for Curley? I want to see somebody. Just see ’em an talk to ’em. There ain’t no women. I can’t walk to town. . . .” And in the last act Steinbeck added in manuscript her dream, one as ordinary as Lennie and George’s:

When this guy was gonna put me in pitchers I thought about Greta Garbo. I gotta girl frien wants to be like Greta. But Greta’s always rich. I think I rather be like Joan Blondell. She’s always poor an she meets this poor guy an they fall in love. . . .

She, like the others, conveys an unvarnished need for a place and for the stature bestowed by a role to play. With the exception of the imperial Slim—a man with status, a man of firm ideas—all seek a form for lives that are otherwise shapeless.

On stage, wrote John Mason Brown, Steinbeck’s novel “emerges . . . as the most poignant statement of human loneliness our contemporary theatre has produced.” The “supreme virtue of the story, on the stage as well as in print,” Brooks Atkinson asserted in a *New York Times* review, “is the lyric perfection of all these rude materials.” Most critics praised the work’s clarity, “heart,” and unflinching realism. Opening on November 23, 1937, at the Music Box Theatre, Kaufman’s *Of Mice and Men* (with Wallace Ford as George, Broderick Crawford as Lennie, Claire Luce as Curley’s wife, and Will Geer as Slim) won the coveted New York Drama Critics Circle Award for 1937 in relatively short order (“all save one of the sixteen voting members had saluted ‘Of Mice and Men’ with a broadside of praise after it opened”). It nudged out two other widely acclaimed competitors, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (which won the Pulitzer for best play) and Clifford Odets’s *Golden Boy*. Running for 207 performances, Kaufman’s play, as much as the novel and the Lewis Milestone film version released in 1939 (“miraculously intact in mood and spirit,” noted *Theatre Arts*), made Steinbeck a household name.

And it helped earn the author and the text a wide-ranging notoriety. “The first few pages so nauseated me,” wrote the reviewer for *The Catholic World*, “that I couldn’t bear to keep it in my room over night.” The Police Bureau in Providence, Rhode Island, denied a license to the “lowdown” play in June 1939. In February 1940, the film was banned in Australia. And in December of