



## **An Analysis Of Ecohumanism In John Steinbeck's Of Mice And Men**

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### **Abstract**

John Steinbeck's major works are based on the human condition and their determination to survive. Steinbeck's attraction toward nature was so natural that he lived in close communion with nature even as a schoolboy. His characters depict his compassion for fellow beings. His humanitarian attitude was very evident in his writings. This paper analyses ecohumanism in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

**Keywords:** *Steinbeck, Ecocriticism, Ecohumanism, Ecology, Humanism, Humanity.*

## **1. Introduction**

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. His birthplace, Salinas, was rich with fertile agriculture valleys, and it was a very big farming region in central California. Steinbeck's attraction toward nature was so natural that he lived in close communion with nature even as a schoolboy. He was obsessed with the beauty of Salinas Valley, its river, and its mountains. He has described his country in almost all his works in an alluring way. Many of the major works of Steinbeck were set in Salinas, California. Steinbeck was a lover of nature and an advocate of human nature. His characters depict his compassion for fellow beings. His humanitarian attitude was very evident in his writings.

The Great Depression of America took its toll on Salinas's agriculture business. Men who worked in the agricultural lands of Salinas were forced to move west for job opportunities. The corporate companies seized the small agricultural lands of Salinas, and thus small farmers lost their job. People were forced to leave their homes, and they wandered like nomads searching for a job. The life of the unemployed changed forever. The jobless bachelor men moved from one part of the country to other and tried to earn money by engaging themselves in whatever job they could get. Such men were referred to as itinerant workers as they were constantly moving from one place to another.

*Of Mice and Men* was published in 1937. Steinbeck, a close observer of both man and nature, has shown the life of the Dust Bowl migrants of California in the novel. He portrayed diverse characters in the novel. His close observation of humanity and nature can be traced in many places in the novel. His detailed description of nature and the human mind proves his ecohumanist attitude.

According to Philip J. Reegal, "Ecohumanism" implies insight into the pattern of connectedness among individuals and between individuals and institutions and with the non-human environment"(62). As Tapp opines, an Ecohumanist analyses the interconnectedness between man and man, man and society, and between man and his non-human environment. On analysing the characters of *Of Mice and Men* through the light of ecohumanism one could understand the anthropocentric attitude of some characters. Steinbeck has portrayed the life of itinerant workers in the novel. Being individual men leading a bachelor's life, most of the characters could not understand the importance of having a true companion. The boss of the bunkhouse, his son Curley, and Carlson, one of the ranch hands, are the few characters who exhibit an anthropocentric attitude in the novel. George and Lennie, the major characters, were exceptional in that case. Candy, a ranch hand, was bound to be submissive to the dominant men of the novel essentially because of his old age and deformity.

Candy was an old man. He was a swamper in the bunkhouse. He lost one of his hands in an accident while working on the ranch. So he was given a compensatory amount by the boss who let him stay on the ranch. He was a general cleaner in the bunkhouse for many years. He lost his hand in middle age. Though he had physical strength, his deformity was the reason behind his degradation. As he was not of much help, his opinions and thoughts were not given importance by his fellow men.

Steinbeck utilised Candy and his old dog to show the relationship between humans and non-humans. In the perception of the other characters of the novel, Candy's dog was old and useless. They insisted him get rid of the dog and asked him to adopt a new puppy. Carlson was ready to kill the dog as, according to him, the dog was struggling for its survival. Its hearing ability had lessened; it neither could see nor hear anything as it had already lost its vision and hearing ability.

Moreover, the dog was stinking. Carlson tried to convince Candy by telling her that he would kill the dog painlessly. Candy had none to talk in favour of the dog; he was disheartened. He sought the help of Slim, the most efficient worker on the ranch, but the latter approved of killing the dog. Reluctantly, Candy lets Carlson take his dog out and kill it eventually.

The loss of his long-time companion, the killing of his old dog left an undeniable pain in the heart of Candy. He felt for the first time that if he had lived in his own place instead of the bunk house he could have let lived his dog. When Carlson, a ranch hand said that he would do something nice to the dog by mercy—killing. He said that the dog was too old, it was stinking and it had gone blind. Candy defended that he had lived with it for so long and he couldn't notice that it stink. He said, "Well-hell! I had him so long. Had him since he was a pup. I herded sheep with him. . . You wouldn't think it to look at him now, but he was the best damn sheep dog I ever seen "(264). But Carlson insisted on killing the dog. He assured that he will kill in a way that it would not hurt the dog by anyways. Candy was not convinced easily he said that the dog was old but he would not mind taking care of it. Slim, the skinner supported Carlson and said that Candy could adopt and raise a new pup. Thus, Carlson took the old dog outside and shot it on its back head.

According to other men, the dog, was just an annoying creature with all its physical inability. They did not recognise or understand its true value. Candy, who pet the dog from its prime age, could not see its inability. He knew that the dog was a very skilled sheepdog in its time. He even tried to convince men that he did not mind taking care of the old dog as he did not see it as an annoyance. He knew that the dog had served its duty well, so he wanted to assist his dog and be helpful when it was struggling because of its old age. Candy was as humane as he never perceived the dog as trouble for him. He wanted to honour his dog by being helpful to it as much as possible. But the anthropocentric world did not let men like Candy treat an animal like a human. They compelled and convinced him to get rid of his dog. Carlson was the one who constantly forced Candy to let him kill the dog. He did not heed any of Candy's words.

While tracing the origin of the ecologic crisis, Lynn White, Jr, in his essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", says that "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs

about our nature and destiny- that is, by religion” (9). Thus in accordance with the above quote, Carlson has less humanitarian values. His thoughts and action are very much authoritarian. He insists Candy let him kill his dog, as he thinks that the dog is of little use. This same attitude may turn towards Candy, who is of very little help to the ranch.

Men like Carlson were anthropocentric and supposed that only humans have the right to live on the earth. These men disregard the value of other non-human creatures. They believe that humans possess the sole right to exercise all power over other living creatures. Carlson was seen constantly pressing his argument on killing the old smelly dog. Even when Crooks, the stable hand diverted their conversation, he resumed the topic again and persistently convinced Candy to let him kill the dog. Steinbeck described his gestures and postures in a pertinent manner. Carlson pointed to the dog with his foot when talking about the dog's inability. This action exposed the arrogance in his attitude and his unsympathetic mind. Candy could not move Carlson with his appeal, and he was left helpless by other men. The old man Candy and his old dog were vulnerable in the harsh world.

Though there were a few men like Candy who treated non-human beings on par with men, society does not let them be different. Because of the social necessity, they were compelled to stoop down from their humanitarian attitude. A society with its dehumanising power did not permit them to live their life as they wished. It constrained their right and desire.

Candy could not fight against the men for his defenceless dog. Once the dog was killed, Candy pondered that soon he would also meet the same end. He had no other relation except his dog. He felt very lonely and believed that he would also be thrown out of the bunkhouse when he became useless to his boss. Thus, Steinbeck understands the dehumanising conditions of human beings, and also another living being is portrayed in the novel. Such conditions prevailing in the world could be eradicated by accepting and following the tenets of ecohumanism.

Robert B. Tapp in his article “Ecohumanism: Some Expansions” opines that:

The main criterion for an ecohumanism will be the effects of situations upon human lives, judged in as global a context as possible. That means taking into account all persons and their descendants as well as the surrounding bio-physico-spheres. First, and foremost, the facts. Then the emotional and aesthetic considerations. And only thereafter, the rhetorical, emotional support systems. (324)

Candy, the old man who lost his hand in an accident serves as an example of treatment of the aged. He faced accident at his young age when he served as an efficient worker in the ranch. The situation after the accident changed as he could no more serve his master efficiently. His fellow workers started to treat him as a man of little help. As he faced tough situations he couldn't think of raising his own family. He decided to stay alone and he felt that his dog was his only reliable companion.

## 2. Conclusion

As ecohumanism explores the portrayal of interconnectedness between nature and human beings in literature, ecohumanists believe that the earth is a big home and human beings of the world are members of it. They emphasise the necessity of egalitarianism. According to Ecohumanists, all men are equal, and all must be provided with equal opportunities for their development. Hence, Steinbeck shows men's wrongdoings to men and men to other living creatures. He insists on the realisation of thought that all living creatures are equal, and he never believed in the so-called hierarchical order that man has created.

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