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Literary Disability Studies in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract: Disability has an omnipresence in our daily lives, from our encounters with people with disabilities in real-life experiences to encountering them in novels, movies, video games, etc. After the Vietnam War was pursued by movements like Civil Rights and social discourses revolving around race, gender, and sexuality gained momentum in the 1970s, there was an urge for a civil rights-based model for disability. Previously, disability was considered a physical or mental deviance in the individual, an affliction to be cured or eliminated. This medical model gave its place to a social model, in which the social, political, and cultural environment rendered people with impairments disabled. Recently, some theorists have denounced drawing lines between the social and medical models and instead propose a liminal cultural model, believing that this mixed paradigm is the only model that does justice to the lived experiences of people with disabilities. The present study aims at analyzing John Steinbeck's novella, *Of Mice and Men*. It investigates how Lennie, a person with a cognitive disability, is treated and the challenges he faces, grounded on Garland-Thomson's cultural theorization of disability through three concepts: feminism, otherness, and disability; the tripartite sociocultural model; liberal individualism, the problem of work and disability.

Keywords: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson; Cultural Criticism; Stigma; Marginalization; Docility-Utility Structure.

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1. Introduction

Disability, physical or mental, is omnipresent in our daily lives. Similar to other minority identities, people with disabilities have been marginalized and discriminated against, especially after the industrial revolution, an era in which functionality has become the paramount aim of existence and credibility. The presence of disability in literature can be traced back to the Poetic Edda, a collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems. Alice Hall (2016), an academic figure in disability studies, in two chapters of her book, *Literature and Disability*, divides the history of disability studies into five chronological periods: early activism, the medical and social model, the rise of disability studies, new challenges for disability theory, and finally, the cultural model. The fifth period is from the late 1990s to the contemporary period in which scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard Davis, and David T. Mitchell put literature at the center of their critical examinations of disability, leading to what she calls a cultural (literary) model.

In this model, the line between disability and impairment is blurred, opening up an arena in which disability studies intersects with other minority identity discourses such as feminism, gender and queer theory, and postcolonialism (Hall 30-31). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is one of the first academics that approaches disability studies from this perspective. Her theorization includes three main sections; first, she scrutinizes the cultural intertwining of femininity, disability, and other minority identities. Second, she frames what I call a tripartite sociocultural model; it is the extrapolation of the ideas of three scholars: Erving Goffman, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault, on the ideas of stigma theory, the concept of dirt and how a culture deals with it, and docility-utility structure, respectively. Thirdly, she explores the relationship between liberal individualism and the treatment of disability, whereby a link is created between disability and the problem of the work. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the novella *Of Mice and Men* grounded on Garland-Thomson's theorization of disability, to shed some light on the treatment that Lennie, a person with a cognitive disability receives, and the challenges that he faces in an early capitalist-ableist society.

2. Literature Review

The major focus of research about *Of Mice and Men* has been on Lennie's depiction as having a cognitive disability, the American Dream, and the marginalization of minorities during the Great Depression in America. Marsden (1995) explores the political relationship between

land (frontier), capital, and labor within the novella, where "the dream of independence and self-sufficiency apparently upheld by the vast spaces of the western frontier does indeed turn out to be destructive and fatal" (291-92). Niewiadomska-Flis (2004) has a social approach to the novella where she asserts that if "the deviants" threaten the norms by their behavior, "society intrudes into the individuals' adjustment with the purpose of maintaining order" (100). Jensen-Moulton (2012) compares the 1937's novella, and the 1970's opera of *Of Mice and Men,* creating a link between disability, humanity, and animality, where the concept of "rationality," a previously-thought humanity marker, is questioned by referring to people with intellectual disabilities (145). McCabe (2014) analyzes two novels, *Of Mice and Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, both exploring the social, cultural, and political assumptions by examining the language of each novel and focusing on a conscious, active reading strategy concerning the negative stereotypes constructed in the novels.

Musafa'at (2014) and Aristide (2019) focus on the struggles of minority groups in the novella that try to achieve equality, grounded on Marxist theories, pointing to the disillusionment of American minorities with the American Dream. Loftis (2017) posits that the depiction of a fictional cognitively disabled character can have a significant influence on public opinion and policy. Patterson (2019) probes four different novels about disability, finding fault within the novella's narrative in that it is not told by Lennie, and this can be a setback considering the previously published novels such as *The Sound and Fury* featuring a cognitively disabled narrator. Oswald (2019) proposes that the attribution of being a canine figure to Lennie is significant, and he believes that "Unstable matters of dis/ability, sex/gender, and race" are intertwined with "unstable matters of species" in the novel (205). Since Lennie is among one of the first major literary characters with a cognitive disability, the analyses revolving around this character are almost abundant; nevertheless, the novelty that the current study has, compared to all the previous research, is that it analyzes the novella based on the affinities between disability, feminism, and otherness, revolving around the marginalized characters around Lennie with whom he has the most interaction, together with intertwining Goffman, Douglas, and Foucault's theories that apply to disability studies, and finally drawing on liberal individualism and the problem of work inherent within Garland-Thomson's theorization, the notions that have not been concatenated previously.

3. Methodology

The present study is grounded on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theorization of disability. In contrast to the previous disparate models of disability studies centering on medicine and psychology as a medical model and then on society as a social model, her proposed theorization is sociocultural in that it does not draw a strict line between the body and the environment, between people with disabilities and the society in which they live (Hall 31-32). In her book, *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson theorizes disability through three concepts: feminism, disability, and otherness; the tripartite sociocultural model; liberal individualism, the problem of work, and disability. By referring to similar traits between the female body and the one with a disability, she finds affiliations between feminism and physical disability. She asserts that "such conditions as anorexia, hysteria, and agoraphobia are in a sense standard feminine roles enlarged to disabling conditions, blurring the line between 'normal' feminine behavior and pathology" (27). That is how mental disability interweaves into the discourse of feminism, where both the female figure and the person with a mental disability are cast as outsiders, deviating from the standard norms. This theorization can be extended to represent an intersectional spectrum in which female figures, African Americans, the lower class, and people with physical or mental disabilities all become the representatives of marginalization. The characters surrounding Lennie with whom he interacts the most will be analyzed based on this theorization.

In her sociocultural model, Garland-Thomson extrapolates from three scholars: Erving Goffman, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault. Goffman (1963) introduces stigma theory in which he renders stigmatization a social process in which all sorts of Otherness, such as disability, can be included. In the process of stigmatization, a social group that has power and authority over other groups, based on its tastes and opinions, determines what to be categorized as not only different but also deviant. In this social comparison process, the dominant group defines its superior ideal self, or the "normate figure," against the alien, inferior, stigmatized self (128). The stigmatized then are forced to go to extreme measures to hide their disability to gain social acceptance (42). Mary Douglas (2001) defines dirt as a matter out of place and the anomalous, from which Garland-Thomson infers that disability is a sociocultural construct, a form of social interpretation rather than any genuine corporeal or mental features. After this interpretation, based on Douglas, culture has to deal with the anomaly in five ways: reduction to the anomalous trait, elimination, avoidance conducing to segregation, labeling as dangerous, and finally, the only potentially positive coping strategy that is the incorporation of the anomalous into a ritual.

Foucault (1980, 1988, and 1995) observes a shift in the Neoclassical age from a Feudal system to a disciplinary regime in which controlling systems such as schools, the army, and hospitals regulate the non-conformants, through which a utilitarian prospect comes into existence, leading to a hierarchy of physical and mental human characteristics based on productivity, utility, and docility as full obedience. Medicine and its measuring agent, health, measure human bodies to compare their productivity, giving credibility to those affirmed as healthy on the surface and functionally useful for the modern industrial society in disguise. That is a period he calls the Great Confinement, in which people who do not live up to the measurements of health and utility are doomed to be segregated in institutions.

Garland-Thomson also elaborates on the relationship between disability and liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is primarily based upon four principles of the self: self-government, self-determination, self-reliance or autonomy, and self-improvement or progress; she sees liberal individualism as "most clearly manifest in the conviction that economic autonomy results from hard work and virtue, while poverty stems from indolence and moral inferiority" (*Bodies* 47). Nonetheless, it is apparent that a person's disability flies in the face of all these characteristics, revealing their chimerical quality. Garland-Thomson, then, creates a link between disability and the problem of work where compensating the disability with charity and pity should be changed into accommodating the environmental and social environments to incorporate people with disabilities in the workplace. To further explicate these ideologies within the literary presentation of a person with a cognitive disability, Lennie, in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, will be studied to reveal how he is treated and what challenges he faces in an ableist society.

4. Analysis

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* at a time when people with cognitive disability were "primarily regarded as burdens on society and were often institutionalized," when the eugenics and the anxieties revolving around it were at their peak (Jensen-Moulton 130; Tubbs 68). How authentically the novella portrays Lennie's cognitive disability is not the purpose of this paper since focusing on its representational authenticity in psychiatric terms reinforces the medical model of viewing cognitive disability, and as Chivers rightly asserts, "such a discussion does not stand to offer much to scholars committed to reconfiguring disability" (2-3). Therefore, the present study mainly focuses on the different aspects with which Lennie is represented and treated in society, based on Garland-Thomson's cultural theorization of disability.

Garland-Thomson finds affinities between feminism, other minority identities, and disability. The main interactions between Lennie and the other characters are revealing. The first character that Lennie interacts with is George. He is from the lower class with the American Dream of owning a couple of acres, a dream that he has also fed Lennie. George's support for Lennie mostly comes from this marginalization. When Lennie beats Curley, a symbol of the upper class, George supports him: "'It ain't your fault'" (Steinbeck 80). However, his perspective is in line with the patriarchal society. George's patriarchal-capitalist ideologies become evident in a conversation with Lennie by emphasizing monetary issues, drinking, and gambling. Being in line with patriarchy and thus the hegemonic ableism finally conduces to Lennie's murder by George. Although George assumes his gesture as mercy-killing, wavering in committing this murder, at the end of the story, he lies about Lennie holding Carlson's gun first. Therefore, George becomes the agent of patriarchy, and to keep himself safe, he assumes that as an act of mercy, he has the right to end Lennie's life.

The next major character that Lennie interacts with is Candy. His disability becomes evident at the beginning of the narrative: "He pointed with his right arm, and out of the sleeve came a round stick-like wrist, but no hand" (Steinbeck 23). Candy is also from the lower-class society and is aware of his and his fellows' situation as having no power in a patriarchal-capitalist society. Thus, he begs George not to tell Curley about their conversation about Curley and his wife. Candy is the first character that does not label Lennie. The possible reason is that he is doubly marginalized, and, as a result, he consciously and unconsciously sympathizes with Lennie as a character both from lower-class society and with a disability.

Another character that Lennie interacts with is Slim. He is also from a lower-class society and is marginalized. After George demands Lennie defend himself in front of Curley, Slim becomes supportive of Lennie by threatening Curley. However, similar to George, he has a quivering behavior toward Lennie, and his perspectives are in line with patriarchal-ableist society; this is revealed when Carlson tries to convince Candy to shoot his dog: "Candy looked a long time at Slim to try to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none" (Steinbeck 57). That is why after Lennie kills Curley's wife unintentionally and George murders Lennie, he consoles George by telling him that he had to do such an act.

The other character that Lennie interacts with is Crooks. From the beginning, the reader learns about the racial discrimination that is practiced on the farm: the Boss takes out his anger on Crooks, and the only night that the other members let him in the bunkhouse, he is forced to fight with Smitty, highlighting that "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" (Abdullah 56-57). Besides, Crooks is physically disabled: "Yeah. Nice fella too. Got a crooked back where a horse kicked him" (Steinbeck 25). At first, Crooks does not make a connection with Lennie. He tells Lennie he is not wanted in the bunkhouse, so the others are not allowed in his room. What slowly functions as a catalyst to their connection is how Lennie justifies his presence there: "'Ever'body went into town,' he said. 'Slim an' George an' ever'body. George says I gotta stay here an' not get in no trouble. I seen your light'" (Steinbeck 83). In this honest confession, Lennie unconsciously highlights the similarity between himself and Crooks: segregation and avoidance. Thus, after this conversation, he allows Lennie to stay. The similar marginalization experience makes Crooks befriend him, and Crooks' room which functions as the symbol of segregation becomes a welcoming place for Lennie.

Another character that has a meaningful interaction with Lennie is Curley's wife. Two instances reveal her similar marginalized situation: one is in Crooks' room, and the other is with Lennie in the barn. When the other men go out one night to have fun and Crooks, Lennie, and Candy are in Crooks' room, she interrupts their conversation: "They left all the weak ones here" (Steinbeck 93). By this phrase, she keenly refers to the marginalized state of the three men in the patriarchal society. However, Curley's wife is not fully aware that by this remark, she has been pointing at herself because she has also been left behind, and as a woman, she is also marginalized. In that conversation, she talks about the experience of loneliness and segregation. She does not even have a name for herself, only referred to as "Curley's wife" throughout the narrative.

Namelessness, as Geary suggests, is equal to a lack of "social durability and legitimacy" (1). However, what makes her different from the three cast-off men in the room is that although a marginalized woman, her ideals are in line with patriarchy. Being in line with patriarchal society makes her stigmatize the other men in the room and threaten Crooks with lynching. She also undermines the men's agency and highlights their lack of voice in a capitalist-patriarchal society. When Curley's wife is alone with Lennie in the barn, once

again, she confides her sense of segregation and loneliness to Lennie because she feels a marginalized status that she shares with Lennie. However, in line with patriarchal norms, she finally becomes the agent for Lennie's murder by the hegemonic ableist-patriarchal society.

Of Mice and Men is undoubtedly set in a society that shames, humiliates, and disenfranchises people who diverge from certain unwritten norms set by powerful groups. The notion of normate vs. non-normate starts with the physical description of George and Lennie (Lawrence 3). Defined against each other, George is depicted as "small," "quick," with "strong features," and "defined," while Lennie is portrayed as his opposite, "huge" and "shapeless of face" (Steinbeck 6). Although these phrases set the two men *physically* apart, it implies the *cognitive* difference by delineating George as someone special and Lennie as a nondescript (Buelens 7). The animal imagery and the bearlike movements also underline the cognitive difference that the reader will later find in Lennie.

The only characteristic that George and Lennie share is their clothing and blanket rolls, connoting their lower-class status and similar occupational situation. However, the binary notion of normativity and non-normativity is still etched upon the narrative, especially in the give-and-take between Slim and George, when Slim highlights the cognitive difference between George and Lennie. George, however, does not find such a sharp cognitive contrast and does not assume himself bright since occupationally, he sees himself as a failure. In his conversation, George confesses that his first motive to get along with Lennie was to have fun and that Lennie's cognitive disability made George stand out as the normate, smart figure (Steinbeck 48).

The first stigmatizer of Lennie is George, a character that Goffman calls "the normal" (5). Although George himself does not set norms and standards, the narrative uses him to highlight the difference between normativity and non-normativity. Therefore, his labeling Lennie as a "crazy bastard" constantly, together with other labels and phrases such as "crazy fool" and "nuts," originates from George's awareness of his superior status as a normal figure and that his ideologies are in line with ableism. The next character that stigmatizes Lennie is Crooks; however, his labeling does not emanate from a superiority he feels toward Lennie but because of his initial disbelief in Lennie's American Dream. The final character that labels Lennie is Curley's wife. Although marginalized, similar to George, she is, to an extent, in line with patriarchal norms, and her stigmatization originates from her sense of superiority.

The incorporation of norms in the mind of the person with a disability results in shame, and concealment to obtain acceptance (Goffman 7, 42). Pressures from groups and society result in one's seeking favor in others' opinions and fearing their disapproval (Niewiadomska-Flis 99). Lennie is no exception. From the beginning, he is encouraged by George to remember things as a normal figure. Lennie is so much full of shame and embarrassment after each realization of forgetting something that any time he remembers something, he is filled with pride. It is as if he is rewarded for getting close to being the normate. There are different cases throughout the narrative where Lennie, due to this fear of disapproval, is urged by George to conceal his cognitive disability through being silent: "… you ain't gonna say a word … If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job" (Steinbeck 10). George is fully aware that in a patriarchal-ableist society, disability is equal to unemployment, no matter how hard one tries. George's conversation with the Boss is one of the revealing ones in this regard because of the tension that both George and Lennie feel due to the oscillation between telling and not telling Lennie's cognitive difference because when the Boss realized it, George had to justify Lennie's departure from the norm by magnifying his strength and job skills.

Not only to start working at the ranch but also to be able to keep their job there, George urges Lennie to hide his disability as much as possible. When Lennie's cognitive disability is revealed, George endeavors painstakingly to win the ranch people's acceptance of Lennie by referring to his strength in performing his job. Even Slim confesses to George that he has been right in emphasizing this matter, which indicates that Lennie and George have been successful in gaining social acceptance for a person with a disability, although the label of being not bright lingers on. The Boss is the only character in the narrative that can be considered as Goffman's normate figure, or the ideal American self: "He wore blue jean trousers, a flannel shirt, a black, unbuttoned vest and a black coat … and he wore high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man" (Steinbeck 25; Silva 75-76).

Three of the culture's five dealing strategies to which Douglas refers occur in the story narrative: labeling as dangerous, avoidance, and elimination. Lennie is constantly labeled dangerous throughout the novel, probably because he is not institutionalized (Mitchell 4). George is the main person who labels Lennie as dangerous by referring to his killing animals and getting into trouble. Paradoxically, he is also the one to exonerate Lennie from this label; his account of his hanging out with Lennie sheds light on the erroneous gesture of

labeling Lennie as dangerous, revealing that Lennie is a kind-hearted person and he does not even harm those who hurt him. Another instance revealing that being dangerous is a mere label given to Lennie is when Curley beats Lennie up. He only starts to defend himself and beat Curley when George yells and wants him to. However, Lennie unintentionally commits murder and substantiates the label of being dangerous. Nevertheless, the same character that started labeling Lennie as dangerous is the one to absolve him from that label due to the act of murder. Twice at the end of the narrative, before Candy and before Slim, George defends Lennie, calling his act of killing Curley's wife not out of "meanness," to justify it and to stop others from murdering him due to Lennie's past actions and cognitive limitations (Steinbeck 112; Black 34).

One of culture's prevailing reactions to people with disabilities is avoidance, and most of the time, segregation lies within it. In the 1930s, people with cognitive and mental disabilities were identified, and segregated. Although Lennie is not segregated, the probability of such enclosure is suggested in the storyline. One is mentioned by Crooks: "'Want me ta tell ya what'll happen? They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog'" (Steinbeck 87). Crooks, however bitter he may be in his remark, has a point: he rightly asserts that if Lennie loses George, he will wind up in an asylum, an institution that treats those with mental disabilities as animals and not full-fledged human beings. The other instance is when Slim and George discuss how they can stop others from killing Lennie: "An' s'pose they lock him up an' strap him down and put him in a cage. That ain't no good, George" (Steinbeck 114). This conversation, too, emphasizes how the 1930s society would segregate and exclude a person with a cognitive disability.

As Garland-Thomson extrapolates from Douglas's theory, eliminating people with disabilities is done through eugenics to fulfill Platonic perfectionism (*Bodies* 35; Douglas 40). She emphasizes this so-called Progressive Era in which "eugenics … was, in fact, the central ideological concept structuring much policy, institutional practice, and public thought" ("Disability Studies" 919). The novel ends with George's murdering Lennie, something that is known to become a kill-or-cure strategy. The first instance of implicit, metaphorical reference to eugenics in the hands of capitalism is Slim's killing the pups except for the biggest, though not being labeled as dangerous like Lennie. The ending of the novel is telling; Lennie's murder substantiates the claim that a person with a cognitive disability cannot fit in such an unprepared ableist society, and to protect others from him

and vice versa, Lennie should be eliminated, leading to the critiques of this novel as sending a negative message that "death is easier than living with a disability" and that his murder by George is justified as mercy-killing: "Slim said, 'You hadda, George. I swear you hadda.'" (Steinbeck 126; Cormier 90; Owens 223).

Foucault highlights the controlling role of the institutions in a disciplinary regime, forming a docility-utility structure based on which each individual is evaluated. In the novella, there is no direct reference to such institutions; however, individuals function as agents of an invisible controlling system whereby Lennie is surveyed, segregated, and punished. The first signs of this authoritarian gaze come from the Boss through whom Lennie is observed: "… before he went out he turned and looked for a long moment at the two men" (Steinbeck 28). Besides surveilling eyes, the notion of controlling a person with a mental disability through confinement comes twice in the storyline. The first mention is by George, fed up with accompanying Lennie: "I wisht I could put you in a cage with about a million mice an' let you have fun" (Steinbeck 16). Although George becomes ashamed later, it highlights the ominous possibility of Lennie's fate if he does not fit into a docility-utility structure. The second reference to segregation as a controlling measure is by Crooks: "Want me ta tell ya what'll happen? They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog" (Steinbeck 87). This speech, too, underlines the bitter fact that if people with a cognitive disability become alone, they will be institutionalized to be controlled.

The emphasis on docility as indisputable obedience and the politicized concept of health as measurement starts in the narrative with Candy's dog. Candy emphasizes that his dog had been very efficient; however, when he loses his functionality, the young, healthy substitutes come to the limelight because they will have utility in a capitalist community. Not only is Candy's dog assumed as futile after he is disabled, but also he is to be eliminated to open up the space for the utile pups. Even the fate of the newborn pups, whether to live or to be drowned is based on the utility structure: "… I kept the biggest" (Steinbeck 42). This recurrent motif of young versus old throughout the narrative is highlighted when Candy, who is fully aware of the patriarchal-ableist structure of his society, talks about his situation as an old crippled character who is to be expelled soon. His account emphasizes that in such a society, as long as individuals are docile and utile enough to serve the society's goals, they can survive; but, as soon as individuals lose their functionality by age or disability, they are to be excluded and eliminated.

Candy's situation and his dog's elimination set the ground for how Lennie will be treated as a person with a cognitive disability in the patriarchal-ableist community. Lennie's docility as full obedience becomes evident in the first lines of the narrative when he is depicted as walking behind George (McCabe 12); however, the most important emblems of his docility occur twice in the storyline by George: "Jus' tell Lennie what to do an' he'll do it if it don't take no figuring. He can't think of nothing to do himself, but he sure can take orders" (Steinbeck 47). When George recalls his memories with Lennie and confides to Slim amid the narrative, he once again pinpoints Lennie's docility when he asks Lennie to jump into the river. This account, along with what George tells the Boss about Lennie, solidifies the standpoint that in a patriarchal society, a person is only accepted if they are docile and utile; thus, George tries to convince the community that although Lennie may deviate from the ableist notions cognitively, he is utile and docile physically and therefore a valuable enough asset to be accepted on the ranch.

As Foucault highlights, the penal mechanism is a vital component of the disciplinary regime through which the non-conforming are to be punished (*Discipline* 177-78). Lennie, as a non-conformant figure, is always warned by George to be punished if he deviates. If a conformant person like Slim chooses to kill pups, there is no penal mechanism; however, when Lennie unintentionally kills one, he is to be punished, and he himself is already aware of it. It is this consciousness of penal mechanism in such an ableist-patriarchal society that leads Lennie towards an unintentional killing of Curley's wife: "'I don't want to hurt you,' he said, 'but George'll be mad if you yell.'" (Steinbeck 108). In this way, to escape from the penal mechanism, Lennie commits murder, leading to his elimination.

As Garland-Thomson suggests, people with disabilities fly in the face of liberal individualism. The titular character contravenes the four concepts inherent within liberal individualism. However, the notion of self-government and self-reliance are the most conspicuous ones. In a liberal individualist society, a person must govern their body, mind, and actions; however, a person with a disability becomes the symbol of out-of-controlness. In *Of Mice and Men*, from the beginning to the end, Lennie is represented as a character gone-out-of-control due to his cognitive disability. He has disrupted the order of his previous workplace because he had been unable to *control* his desire for soft textures, and he will disrupt the order of the ranch for the same reason. Even George, to expiate Lennie from killing Curley's wife and to save his life, refers to this notion: "Don't shoot 'im. He di'n't know what he was doin'" (Steinbeck 115).

Self-reliance is yet another concept defied in the storyline. A person with a disability has not been immune to external forces, and their disability violates that immunity. This person is also assumed as vulnerable and in need of help and care from others. Lennie's cognitive disability in the novella is constantly attempted to be disguised by George because he is aware that on the ranch, such lack of autonomy and immunity to outside forces are equal to exclusion from that community. In addition, although Lennie is a hard worker who devotes himself to what is asked of him, and his power and commitment is the reason why George also gets the jobs, George, alongside his co-workers, believes that Lennie cannot take care of himself and in order to survive, he should be under the wings of another neurotypical person.

Self-determination and self-improvement come hand in hand with the problem of work in a capitalist society. In such a society, economy, competition, and dynamism come to the fore, where each individual is responsible for "their own social stations, economic situations, and relations with others" (Garland-Thomson, *Bodies* 43). These principles finally become manifest in a person's relation to their career, where a "self-made American man" has the absolute chance of constantly moving towards economic success (ibid 47). In the novella, Lennie works his way through becoming a member of the ranch and endeavors to achieve his dream with George to become self-sufficient. However, his efforts are easily ignored when the events turn out to reveal his disability. It is where a marginalized character shatters these ideas, and society becomes entangled in a dilemma of establishing a boundary between the inability to work and the unwillingness to work. This binary structure leads to the compensation-accommodation model of how society deals with the problem of work regarding those with disabilities.

In the novella, both the compensation and accommodation models are absent. There is no apparent effort on the part of the ranch to compensate for Lennie's occupational and financial state. He is not supported monetarily by acts of pity and/or generosity. He has to do his best as a farmhand to make a living by becoming "an ideal worker for the industrial system" (Marsden 296). The accommodation model is also blatantly absent since there is no restructuring on the ranch for Lennie to be incorporated into the occupational atmosphere. A recurrent motif which I call "label versus power and labor" is woven into the narrative at different moments through which George constantly changes the subject from Lennie's cognitive disability to his extraordinary power and hard work, indicating that there is no

single effort on the part of the capitalist-ableist society, or the upper-class like the Boss who has the upper hand, to provide proper accommodations or to facilitate the society with adjustments to include people with cognitive disabilities like Lennie, socially and occupationally, thus striping people off of the vocational chances if they are not neurotypical.

5. Conclusion

In *Of Mice and Men*, Lennie creates a special bonding with some marginalized characters. However, he is stigmatized, portrayed as non-normate, going to extreme measures to hide his disability, and working laboriously on the ranch to win the farmhands' favor. He is assumed by many as out-of-control and in need of help and care from neurotypical George, while Lennie is occupationally the supporting side of the relationship. Society does not compensate for or accommodate him vocationally, and though he works unconditionally hard, his efforts are easily underestimated. In addition, he is constantly labeled as dangerous, surveyed by the authoritarian gaze to be controlled, and incessantly urged to remember his exclusion if not fit into the docility-utility structure. The penal mechanism of the disciplinary regime always intimidates him into acting as "normal," and the fear of punishment pushes him toward unintentional murder. Finally, Lennie is threatened several times to be enclosed and institutionalized and is consequently eliminated in the name of mercy.

In contrast with more recent novels featuring the main character with a cognitive disability, such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Lennie's story is not told by himself and he is denied such representational agency. Besides, Lennie does not go through much visible transformation. The reader observes a lack of agency in him, emanating from the fact that Lennie has already internalized his stature as a marginalized character due to his cognitive disability and does not endeavor to change his position. It is safe to say that Steinbeck tried his best to reflect the context of his time, the 1930s, in which neurotypical subjectivity was the only valid one. One may argue that analyzing a work of literature from almost a century ago will not contribute much to the present current of disability studies; however, it is necessary to note that excavating the works written in the past about disability, especially the ones assumed to be the first popular depictions such as Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, will pave the way for studying more recent works of literature, and even other works of art such as paintings and movies, comparing different aspects of

their representational value concerning disability. That the works of literature and art affect society and vice versa underlines the need to look critically at these texts to trace their influence on public perception and public beliefs on recent and upcoming works of art and literature. It is in this way that we can do justice to the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

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