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The Existence Predicament of the Migrant Workers in *Of Mice and Men* Based on Marx's Theory of Labor Alienation

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Abstract

Of Mice and Men is a novella set against the backdrop of the Great Depression in the United States, telling the unsolvable tragedy of George and Lennie, two migrant farm workers. Since its publication, the novel has received widespread attention from the academic community. Previous studies tend to treat alienation as a thematic motif or a general social condition rather than as a structured, four-dimensional process that generates a specific existential predicament. This paper takes Marx's theory of labor alienation as its framework and proceeds from the four dimensions of labor alienation—the alienation between humans and labor products, the alienation between humans and the labor process, the alienation between humans and their species-essence, and the alienation in human relationships. These four dimensions are interconnected and interact with one another, ultimately leading to the unsolvable existential predicament of migrant workers. This paper systematically analyzes the alienation experienced by the two protagonists in *Of Mice and Men* under specific historical conditions, and dissects the existential predicament they face. The study points out that the tragedy of George and Lennie is not due to personal reasons, but is an inevitable product of the capitalist labor system of that time.

Keywords

Marx's Theory of Labor Alienation, *Of Mice and Men*, Migrant Workers, Existence Predicament

1. Introduction

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is a landmark of twentieth-century

Western literature. Set in Depression-era California, the novel traces the tragic arc of two migrant farm laborers, whose are the sharp-witted George Milton and the burly, simple-minded Lennie Small, as they chase a shared dream, only to see it crumble. Through their story, Steinbeck exposes a sobering reality that in a nation riven by class division and the worship of wealth, the longing of ordinary workers for a life of dignity is ultimately no more than a mirage.

Since its publication, *Of Mice and Men* has drawn widespread scholarly interest. Critics have approached the novel from various angles, such as female voicelessness, subaltern groups, animal imagery, narratology, and biopolitics. Within Marxist criticism specifically, Balci (2013) reads the novella through the concepts of alienation and exploitation, arguing that the ranch system reduces workers to commodities; Singh and Tyagi (2021) catalogue the various forms of alienation the characters endure; and Guan (2013) traces the hopeless struggle of alienated figures who cannot escape their circumstances. These studies establish alienation as a central concern of the text, but they generally treat it either as a thematic inventory or as a diffuse social malaise. What remains underdeveloped is an account of how the four dimensions of labor alienation operate as an interlocking structure and how that structure produces what I term an "existential predicament": a condition in which workers are still biologically alive but can find no reason to justify their continued living.

First developed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (2007), Marx's theory outlines four fundamental dimensions of alienation: from the product of labor, from the act of production, from species-being, and from other human beings. For Marx, alienation produces a force that ultimately dominates those who experience it. In this sense, the tragic fate of George and Lennie offers literary validation of the profound social crisis at the heart of Marx's analysis. This paper takes the four dimensions of labor alienation as its interpretive lens. The analysis selects passages in which the narrative explicitly addresses work, wages, the dream of ownership, and the characters' relationships to one another and to their own capacities. Each dimension is distinguished by its object of estrangement: the product (what the worker makes), the process (how the worker works), species-being (what the worker is), and other humans (how the worker relates). These dimensions are treated not as separate categories but as a sequence in which each deepens the next (Lin, 2025). Situating the novel within its specific historical context, this paper examines the existential predicament of the migrant worker population that George and Lennie come to represent, and in doing so, exposes the inescapable tragedy of the underclass under the capitalist labor system of the Great Depression era.

2. Alienation from the Product of Labor

Marx defines this concept in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men

(Marx, 2007: p. 44).” In other words, under the capitalist labor system, workers generate enormous wealth through their labor, yet the products of that labor do not belong to them and they receive only meager wages in return. The very goods they produce must then be purchased at a cost, and what they have brought into being ultimately turns into an alien force that comes to dominate them.

In the novel *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie work the farm day in and day out, including cutting wheat, hauling grain sacks, tending livestock. However, every bit of wealth they produce, such as the mountains of grain, the thriving cattle, goes not to them but to the ranch owner. And what they receive is only a meager wage. This reveals a contradiction at the heart of their lives that they spend their days on vast farmlands, yet their deepest longing is for a tiny patch of ground to call their own (Gong, 2026). The “farm dream” they cling to is, in essence, a form of resistance against this alienation. Only on that land, they imagine, would their labor and its fruits be reunited (Hale, 2010). And only there would they stop working for someone else’s profit. But a bitter irony runs through this dream that the harder they work to make it real, the further it slips away. The dream, however, is not merely a matter of saving enough wages, but is blocked by structural barriers that have little to do with how hard the workers labor. Migrant workers in 1930s California were paid subsistence wages that left almost nothing for savings (Heavilin, 2021). Moreover, they were also transient, moving from ranch to ranch with the harvest, which made accumulated property impractical. The fantasy of the small farm thus runs against the economic logic of the period, not simply against the workers’ own effort.

Candy’s situation complicates this picture in an instructive way. When Candy offers his three hundred and fifty dollars in compensation for his lost hand, the purchase suddenly appears feasible (Steinbeck, 2002: pp. 59-60). For a moment, the dream is not a mirage but a concrete plan. Yet Candy’s money comes from an accident, not from wages. It means it is a one-time payment that cannot be repeated. Even with it, the three men remain dependent on the ranch economy for their survival until the deal is done. The point is not that the dream continually recedes in proportion to their labor, but that the barriers to ownership are structural, including wages too low to save, land too concentrated to afford, and workers too transient to accumulate. Candy’s savings do not refute this structure. They momentarily reveal how easily this possibility is destroyed by forces beyond the workers’ control.

This is why Crooks, the Black stable hand, speaks with such bitter resignation, “I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches…They come, an’ they quit an’ go on; an’ every damn one of ‘em’s got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ‘em ever gets it (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 71).” Like George and Lennie, every migrant worker arrives with a dream, only to become, unwittingly, the raw material for the capitalist’s growing fortune. Marx’s insight that “the increase in the value of the world of things is directly proportional to the devaluation of the world of men” finds its literary echo in *Of Mice and Men*. That

is on the ranch, grain piles high and the owner's wealth swells, while George and Lennie's pockets stay empty.

3. Alienation from the Act of Production

Alienation from the product of labor entails that the fruits of labor belong not to the worker but to the capitalist. From this follows a second, deeper estrangement that labor no longer serves as a means of self-affirmation for the worker but as its negation. Work ceases to be an expression of the worker's essential powers. This is what Marx means by alienation from the act of production itself. As Marx puts it, "The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself (Marx, 2007: p. 47)." In other words, labor should be an activity that workers engage in willingly, even joyfully. Yet under capitalism, they are driven to it by the sheer pressure of survival. In the process of working, they do not experience themselves as freely exercising their physical and intellectual capacities. In contrast, they feel that both body and mind are being worn down. It is hardly surprising that workers find their greatest contentment not in labor, but in its absence.

In *Of Mice and Men*, labor itself is never portrayed in a positive light. The narrative withholds detailed depictions of the work, leaving readers with only a sense of monotony and exhaustion (Parrott, 2023). Through this deliberate ellipsis, Steinbeck conveys, all the more powerfully, that the migrants' work contains no joy. They simply repeat the same mindless, mechanical tasks day after day, like beasts of burden, finding in their labor nothing but oppression and pain. This is why, when George and Lennie speak of their "farm dream", they both focus instinctively on the hope of lighter work, "Sure, we'd have a little house an' a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an' in the winter we'd keep a fire goin' in it. It ain't enough land so we'd have to work too hard. Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn't have to buck no barley eleven hours a day. An' when we put in a crop, why, we'd be there to take the crop up. We'd know what come of our planting (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 56)." Their dream unwittingly reveals their reality in the farm now and the immense physical and mental strain that labor imposes on them. In imagining a different life, they are consciously envisioning a break from this alienation. The little farm is not only just a dream but also a longing to reclaim their own subjectivity.

When George describes how he would spend his evenings, he pictures himself blowing his fifty-dollar monthly wage at a whorehouse, downing a gallon of whiskey, playing twenty-one, and so on (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 9). These moments of indulging animal instincts, he suggests, are the only times he truly feels at ease. For migrant workers like George, working hours are forced and regimented when time does not belong to them. Only after the workday ends, through drinking, gambling, and visiting women, can they claim time as genuinely "their own". In this sense, when engaged in the activity proper to human beings, they feel reduced to animals; and when they yield to animal instincts, they feel most human.

4. Alienation from Species-Being

The estrangement of the worker from the labor process, which is the experience of work as a torment of both mind and body, generates a deeper crisis that a debilitating sense of powerlessness over one's own essence. This, for Marx, constitutes alienation from species-being. The "species-being" of human lies in the free and conscious transformation of the world. Through labor, human beings are meant to turn nature into their "inorganic body" and, in reshaping the objective world, to prove themselves as conscious, species-existences. Yet the reality, as Marx observes, is that "Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life-activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence (Marx, 2007: p. 49)." Alienated labor reduces human species-life to nothing more than animal survival.

In *Of Mice and Men*, when introducing Lennie to the ranch boss, George describes him in terms of brute capacity through "he can lift four hundred pounds" and "he's as strong as a bull" (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 19). He says nothing of Lennie's character, feelings, or hopes. The focus is entirely on his animal-like labor power. From a modern perspective, this is a clear denial of human species-being because it is a reduction of a person to a mere object. Yet within the logic of the novel, this is the only reason Lennie can be hired at all. His entire worth as a human being is compressed into a single metric, one used to evaluate livestock: his physical output.

Hearing George's words, "Lennie smiled to himself (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 20)", which is an innocent, satisfied smile. This smile may be read as evidence that he has internalized the animal standard and accepts it as praise. But the stronger evidence for alienation from species-being lies not in the smile itself but that Lennie's conscious, self-directed activity is radically restricted: he cannot choose his work, cannot set its pace, cannot determine its purpose, and cannot even articulate what he wants beyond the repetitive fantasy of tending rabbits. On the ranch, his activity is commanded by others and oriented entirely toward survival. It is this restriction of conscious, self-directed activity, not the animal comparison alone, that establishes the dimension of alienation from species-being. The smile, read as a possible rather than a definitive sign, illustrates how deeply the reductive standard has penetrated the characters' world, but it is the structural constraint on Lennie's agency that constitutes the alienation itself.

It reveals that labor alienation operates not only within the economic structure, but deep within human consciousness as well, gnawing at the very foundation of species-being, until human life is reduced to a daily grind for nothing more than physical survival.

5. Alienation from Other Human Beings

Alienation from the product of labor, from the labor process, and from species-being leads directly to a fourth: alienation from other human beings. Marx argues that "If a man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by the other man. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product or his labor and to himself,

also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor (Marx, 2007: p. 50)." In essence, when a person is so alienated that he can no longer experience his own humanity, he becomes incapable of establishing a genuinely human connection with anyone else.

On the ranch in *Of Mice and Men*, human relationships are reduced to little more than self-interested calculation. Trust and selfless mutual aid find scant foothold. The ranch boss himself voices this alienated way of seeing others early in the novel. When George arrives with the simple-minded Lennie, the boss immediately presses him: "What stake you got in this guy? You takin' his pay away from him? (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 20)". From the boss's perspective, Lennie is a moneymaking machine, and George's advocacy can only mean one thing that he is exploiting Lennie for his wages. This instinctive suspicion is itself direct evidence of alienation between human beings. The boss is not deliberately stirring trouble or speaking with malicious irony. He is simply living, in the most ordinary sense, within the logic of capitalism, taking for granted that all human relations are governed by the pursuit of self-interest.

At the end of the novel, George kills Lennie which is an act that, in my reading, is a forced choice born of alienated human relations. Lennie has accidentally killed Curley's wife. If Curley catches him, he will surely subject him to vigilante violence. George, the only person who truly loves him, is powerless to offer any protection within a social order so thoroughly eroded (Covais, 2023). Therefore, George faces not a question of whether to kill, but of who will do it, Curley or himself. After agonizing hesitation, he chooses to take Lennie's life with his own hands. The way George has Lennie recount their dream of the future, letting him die in a moment of sweetness and hope, makes clear that he is not a heartless man. Throughout the novel, their relationship stands as the single enduring example of resistance against alienation. Yet even this bond of genuine human connection ultimately succumbs to the logic of capitalism, which is defeated by the all-pervasive alienation of human relations that surrounds them. What the novel shows is not that personal factors are irrelevant, but that the structural conditions of alienated labor and alienated human relations so narrow the field of action that George's choice becomes the only one available that preserves a trace of dignity. The inevitability is structural, not personal. It operates by foreclosing alternatives rather than by erasing individual agency entirely.

6. Conclusion

The novel *Of Mice and Men* takes its title from the Scottish poet Robert Burns's To a Mouse, "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men/Gang aft agley (Burns, 1991: lines 39-40)." The title itself testifies powerfully to Marx's theory of labor alienation. Men and animals are weighed on the same scale. The worker's relation to the product of his labor is like that of a plow ox, toiling all its life without ever tasting a single grain of the harvest. His relation to the labor process is like that of a mill donkey, trudging in endless circles, day after day. Therefore, the gap between man

and his species-being widens until he can no longer recognize his own human essence, and human relations, stripped of trust, are reduced to bare calculation and self-interest.

This paper has employed Marx's theory of labor alienation through its four dimensions, which is first developed in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, to analyze the "predestined trajectory" of the migrant workers George and Lennie under capitalism, and to illuminate their profound and inescapable existential predicament. The analysis reveals that the tragedy of George and Lennie is by no means the result of personal flaws or mere accident of fate. It is the inevitable product of alienated labor within the capitalist system. This inevitability means that the structural conditions of alienated labor so constrain the range of possible actions that the tragedy becomes unavoidable within them. When the worker is dispossessed of the product of his labor, when the labor process eludes his control, when his species-being is degraded to a mere means of physical survival, and when human bonds are supplanted by profit and suspicion, then he ceases to be a full human being and becomes nothing more than a walking unit of labor power. So long as labor alienation persists, for workers, to live is merely to keep on living.

Early in *Of Mice and Men*, George observes of migrant workers like himself that "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world (Steinbeck, 2002: p. 12)." At this point, he still has Lennie beside him, and he believes the two of them are uniquely equipped to resist alienation. Yet by the end, under the inexorable logic of capital, George has become precisely the kind of solitary migrant worker he once described. This reversal of fortune serves as the most poignant testament to Marx's theory of labor alienation. The deepest predicament of all migrant workers is this: you are still alive, yet you can find no reason to prove why you should go on living.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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