



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

The Marxist Concept of Alienation and Exploitation in *Of Mice and Men*

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to.”

(Steinbeck, 1994, 15)

University of Gothenburg

Dept. of Languages and Literatures/English

Fatma Balci, 07/07/1987

D-level paper, 15 hec.

Supervisor: Ronald Paul

Examinator: Margret Gunnarsdottir Champi

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* from a Marxist perspective. It focuses on how the author succeeds in bringing out the alienated in capitalism from two different levels. The first level demonstrates Steinbeck's ability to successfully dramatize the condition of the alienated and exploited working class with the use of specific aesthetic elements. The second level reveals that by accurately and realistically portraying the characters and those they represent, Steinbeck achieves in bringing out the marginalized in society. These two levels together demonstrate the reason why *Of Mice and Men* is a timeless story, universally appreciated.

Keywords: *Of Mice and Men*, Marxism, alienation, exploitation, capitalism, marginalized people.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction.....	p. 4-6
The Great Depression and Dominant Ideologies.....	p. 7-10
The Aesthetic Elements.....	p. 11-15
Alienation and Exploitation.....	p. 16-23
Conclusion.....	p. 24-25
♦	
References.....	p. 26-27

Introduction

In this essay I will concentrate on the theme of alienation in *Of Mice and Men* viewed from two different levels: first the aesthetic features utilized by Steinbeck in order to portray alienation in the story; the second level will focus on analyzing in what way the characters represent the alienated and exploited working class. I will also examine the ideology of the American Dream during the Great Depression and connect it with Marx's understanding of capitalism.

Like many creatures, human beings depend on social interaction for a sense of comfort and belonging. It is through communication and relations with others that we acquire knowledge, which allows us to evolve as individuals and develop an identity. John Steinbeck portrays a very rare image, in *Of Mice and Men*, of two working class migrant laborers who have the company of each other, instead of traveling alone as many others at that time did. Through the story of Lennie and George, one encounters several characters that travel alone and are demoralized by their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Being denied any social contact with other equally intelligent human beings fosters the feeling of seclusion among the workers. Seclusion and alienation is also portrayed from another angle; where workers (including George and Lennie) are alienated by the capitalist mode of production. From a Marxist perspective, the laborers are reified and confined as a class, which subsequently contributes to their alienation as workers.

The literature I will mainly utilize in my essay is Marx's *Das Capital*, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844*, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* and Parker's *How to Interpret Literature*. Although there are many other works that will be used when writing this essay, I believe that these five books are the foundation my essay is built on. The reason is, I believe, these works best describe and explain Marxism and how literature can be interpreted from a Marxist perspective. *Das Capital* mainly focuses on the economical aspect, which I need to grasp in order to comprehend capitalism in large. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844* and *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, both explain the terms alienation and exploitation, which are fundamental themes in my study. *Marxism and Literary Criticism* and *How to Interpret Literature*, provide clarification of key Marxist theories, which are essential regarding the essay's theoretical framework.

Marx's understanding and definition of alienation is that it has four different features. The first is alienation of the worker from the product of his/her labor. (Marx, 2000, 29) The second feature of alienation is, according to Marx, when the worker is alienated from the act of his/her production and thus is not able to identify with the labor he/she does. (Marx, 2000, 30) The third manner in which alienation reveals itself is, according to Marx, when we are alienated from the true essence of our species-being: Estranged labor reverses the 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, 2000, 31-32). Marx's final feature of alienation is the alienation of a worker from other workers, derived by the bourgeoisie's encouragement of competition in the work environment. (Marx, 2000, 32)

In *Marxism and Literary Criticism* Eagleton discusses Friedrich Engels' concept of ideology; that art/literature are connected to ideology, unlike politics, law and religion, which are "more complex". (Eagleton, 2002, 16) Eagleton explains that, even if we might not know the "truth" about what an ideology disguises, it is through art that we can experience and get a better understanding (knowledge) of that ideology, "which is equivalent to ideology." (Eagleton, 2002, 17)

My claim in this essay is that through deliberate usage of aesthetic elements, such as the diversity of dialects and the method of focalization, and by exposing contradiction within dominant ideologies, such as the American Dream, Steinbeck manages to bring forth the alienated and exploited in society. I believe, that this is the main reason his novel is loved and appreciated by so many ordinary readers. As a reader, one is able to relate to the characters and their suffering due to the realistic approach the novel takes.

As I mentioned earlier, my intention with this essay is to approach the subject of alienation and exploitation from two different levels. However, in order to truly comprehend the Marxist terms of alienation and exploitation, one must first have an understanding of the capitalist mode of production.

The capitalist mode of production, created by the dominant ideology of a market economy, is a mode of production where the entire process (M-C-M) is privatized. The bourgeoisie rule capitalist society by owning the land/property and the means of production, and in order for the proletariat to survive in society they are forced to sell their labor power. (Marx & Engels, 1998, chapters 2-4) It is through the capitalist mode of production that exploitation emerges. According to Marx, the

exploitation of the worker is a result of the bourgeoisie's constant need to create surplus value. The capitalist exploits the worker by i.e. paying the workers less than they deserve, or by providing them with a poorer work environment than required and so on. By exploiting the worker, the capitalist is able to get more surplus value than is otherwise achievable. (Marx & Engels, 1998, 242-243) Arun Bose, the author of *Marx on Exploitation and Inequality*, emphasizes the fact that not only is it through exploitation that alienation develops but it is the *primary* source of alienation. (Bose, 1980, 10)

In the first chapter, I will historicize Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* by linking it to The Great Depression in America, which is the setting of the story, as well as linking it to the American Dream, an ideology prevalent amongst the working class during the Great Depression. By explaining Marx's concept of capitalism and connecting it to the American Dream and the Great Depression, I will try to give the reader a clearer picture of how these elements are linked, and how they are portrayed in *Of Mice and Men*.

The second chapter will focus on different aesthetic elements Steinbeck has used, with the purpose of portraying the characters as realistic as possible. I will discuss how the narrative style, repetitive patterns and character descriptions contribute in centralizing the alienated in the story.

In the final chapter, I will concentrate on the four types of alienation founded by Marx, and how these modes of alienation are portrayed in the novel. Next, I will discuss Marx's view of exploitation in a capitalist society, and give examples of where this can be uncovered in the story. Finally in this chapter, I will discuss how Steinbeck manages to bring out the marginalized in society through his portrayal of alienation and exploitation.

The Great Depression and Dominant Ideologies

The story of *Of Mice and Men* takes place in John Steinbeck's birth town Salinas, a municipality in California close to the Salinas River and Salinas Valley. Being born and raised in the heart of an agricultural society managed by capitalism, Steinbeck witnessed first hand the effects capitalism had on the working class. As a reader, one can clearly see the connection between Steinbeck's stories and his personal background. Jay Parini, the writer of *John Steinbeck – A Biography*, explains that Steinbeck searched his life and his personal experiences not only to find inspiration for his stories, but also to understand more about himself and his background. (Parini, 1995, 1-3) Parini continues with the notion that by reexamining one's past a writer changes and rearranges it into what he calls "personal mythos": That is, we create the story of our lives, selecting certain details from others to find order, to discover an aesthetically satisfying form within the chaos of experience. (Parini, 1995, 2) When Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* he was greatly influenced by his own experiences and personal interactions with migrant laborers. It is through his personal mythos that the story comes to life and becomes convincing. By applying his own experiences to the novel, the story comes to life. Those who share Steinbeck's view on the hardships of life or have experienced it themselves are able to identify with the story and sympathize with the characters.

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* during a difficult time in American history. The Great Depression, triggered by the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929, had a major impact on American society and, according to Gerald D. Nash, caused it to partially collapse. 33% of the workforce became unemployed and some, like George and Lennie in the novel, were forced to migrate around the country in search of a job. (Nash, 1979, 6-7) In losing one's job, one also loses one's status in society, which "caused suffering and brought much personal unhappiness into the lives of millions of Americans." (Nash, 1979, 7) In the case of George and Lennie, the migrant laborer's lifestyle of moving from place to place just to survive became even more difficult. The feeling of hope at the end of the tunnel was replaced by the realization of being stuck in a lifestyle of constant movement and loneliness. The depression in the country forced migrants into a vagrant lifestyle, as there were few jobs for them anywhere.

The American migrant existence is described in Tony Dunbar and Linda Kravits book *Hard Traveling*, which documents the working conditions and life of

migrants. They also call attention to the fact that migrant laborers were situated at the bottom of the class hierarchy; they were physically, psychologically and financially exploited by both the employers and the government. (Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 2-3) Knowing that there was no possibility for employment in urban areas laborers were forced to migrate in order to obtain a livelihood. A migrant laborer is always on the road searching for a job, working short and intense periods before heading off to a new place. The motives for migration were, lack of knowledge in other areas than farming, lack of jobs in urban areas and a desire to leave modern industrial society (for several reasons) by adapting to the migrant lifestyle. (Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 1) George and Lennie choose migrant labor in order to escape from capitalist society and in search for a more harmonious life where they are their own masters. Their plan is to work as laborers solely to accumulate the necessary capital to purchase their own farm. Yet, the dream never seems to come to fruition due to the demands of migrant labor and capitalistic society's constant exploitation of the laborers. Dunbar and Kravitz explain that once workers entered the migrant labor milieu, it was almost impossible to escape it. As there were no labor contracts, a migrant laborer was never certain that the job he/she had was for the entire month and never certain that the wage that was first promised would be given at the end. If somehow one did manage to save money, the alcohol sold by the boss would often be too tempting. (Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 1-2) The laborers in *Of Mice and Men* encounter the same kind of experience as actual migrant laborers did during the depression. The characters, just like real migrant laborers, suffer the same sensation of loneliness; exploitation and alienation. Steinbeck captures the condition of migrant laborers, of being entrapped in a box labeled "working class", when Curley says in the novel: 'I never seen a guy really do it,' he said. 'I seen guys nearly crazy with loneliness for land, but ever' time a whore house or a blackjack game took what it takes.' (Steinbeck, 1994, 76) Lennie and George never seem to be able to save enough money for their dream, instead, like other employees, they are stuck in the migrant circle with no possible exit. However, despite the endless hard work, the two protagonists never abandon their dream of a life beyond capitalist society.

In 1776 the American Declaration of Independence declared that everyone, despite class or background, had the right to pursuit their dream of happiness.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,

that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (The Declaration of Independence).

Ever since the United States gained its independence, the American Dream has been a dominant and celebrated part of its collective ideology. Hochschild, writes that the American Dream is different for different people; some might dream of the right to vote, while others dream of owning a house/land. (Hochschild, 1995, 15) George's and Lennie's dream is to one day have their own farm and live freely by utilizing nature. Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream*, explains that George and Lennie's vision was a dream shared by many Americans. (Cullen, 2003, 9) Cullen points out that the idea to "acquire a place they could call their own." was nicknamed as "The American Dream of owning a home". (Cullen, 2003, 136)

Living in a capitalist society that has a monopoly on ideology, migrant laborers are never able to realize their dream. Unless the economic base is replaced by another, people like George and Lennie will be forced to live in a class society ruled by greed and exploitation. The American Dream, like many other ideologies, was developed as a way of deceiving the working class to believing that they are working for their own sake. Having a dream or a goal to strive towards provides the worker with the hope and the strength needed to accept and endure the employer's demands. However, as their dreams are deliberately and misleadingly produced by the capitalist, the workers unconsciously labor towards an unachievable dream. The capitalistic society has normalized its hierarchical class structure to the level where the sufferers of the structure unknowingly yield to it. George's and Lennie's dream of someday being house owners is the reason they endure the long and hard working days. Having that dream blinds them to the reality of their situation. The protagonists, who also represent the working class, are influenced by capitalist ideology to a degree where they are not able to comprehend the deceptiveness of the system. (Eagleton, 1994, 23) Commodity fetishism is a result of this, and it "does so in ways which blind individuals to their true social relations." (Eagleton, 1994, 24) Marx's understanding of a commodity, according to Eagleton, is that it is a man-made product originally belonging to the one who produces it. In capitalism however, a commodity no longer functions as a necessity produced by humans but is instead mass-produced to a degree where commodities "have a fetishistic life of their own" (Eagleton, 1994, 23) George and Lennie produce commodities not on their own behalf but for others in society, making them slaves of the modern society. As Marx notes:

Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. (Marx & Engels, 2000, 18)

The characters in *Of Mice and Men* live in a time where capitalism was at its peak and class differences were great. You were either a proletariat or a bourgeoisie, there was nothing in between. Ideologies that favored the bourgeoisie were normalized; the proletariat was unconsciously manipulated into living by these ideologies when in reality they did not benefit them. George and Lennie, as well as the other workers, work eleven hours a day in poor conditions, without ever questioning it. Capitalist society had normalized long workdays and bad conditions to the degree where the workers expect it. Before George and Lennie arrived at the ranch, they knew what the conditions would be like, how the boss would be and what type of job they would be doing. They had experienced it many times before that and they knew exactly how it would be at the ranch. “Tomorra we’re gonna go to work. I seen thrashin’ macines on the way down. That means we’ll be bucking grain bags, bustin’ gut.” (Steinbeck, 2000, 9) Just by seeing the machines used on the ranch, George knows exactly what he will be doing there and what will be expected of him. This demonstrates how ideologies developed by the capitalist society are engraved within the proletariat. The working class unconsciously assumes that the American Dream benefits them, never questioning its true existence.

The Aesthetic Elements

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck focuses on marginalized people in capitalist society through the use of aesthetic elements. Through a deliberate application of a specific narrative style, language usage and certain way to describe the characters, Steinbeck succeeds in giving a voice to those relegated to the bottom of society.

The narrator in *Of Mice and Men* is an omniscient, all-knowing third person. As the story is told by an anonymous, all-knowing narrator, the reader regards the narration as the “truth”. (Shlomith, 2001, 94-95) This style of narration enhances the realistic features of the story and consequently it becomes more believable. Steinbeck’s conscious use of an omniscient narrator makes the narration reliable, which subsequently generates a sense of realism in the fictional story. This sense of realism is crucial in order to connect the story to the real world and make the characters seem as though they represent something greater than themselves.

Crooks had his apple box over his bunk, and in it a range of medicine bottles, both for himself and for the horses. There were cans of saddle soap and a drippy can of tar with its paint brush sticking over the edge. And scattered about the floor were a number of personal possessions; for, being alone, Crooks could leave his things about, and being a stable buck and cripple, he was more permanent than the other men. (Steinbeck, 1994, 66)

The benefits of an omniscient narrator is that Steinbeck manages to realistically portray Crooks and his situation and condition in a manner where the reader is “lured” into accepting it as the truth. By, as an example, emphasizing on the adjectives “alone” and “cripple”, the narrator manages to give the reader a glimpse into Crooks’ lonesome situation and as a result we sympathize with his sufferings. This specific choice of narration influences the reader into accepting the author’s portrayal of Crooks more easily, thus making the work appear as realistic.

There are also sub-narrators in the story who tell stories about their personal lives, thus giving a voice to the voiceless in society. Lennie, who is portrayed as mentally challenged, Crooks the black stable buck, Candy the old farmer and Curley’s wife, who is always discussed in association with her husband Curley – all of these characters represent the marginalized in society. Steinbeck gives these outcasts a voice by allowing them (unlike the other characters) tell their own stories. Lennie is not able to tell his own story due to his mental disability; his story is therefore

narrated by George. When these characters are allowed to tell their own stories, they become subordinate narrators. (Shlomith, 2001, 91) The reader is able to follow the story subjectively, which allows one to relate to the characters and their suffering. An example of this is Curley's wife who, throughout the story, is defined as a "tramp". (Steinbeck, 1994, 33) It is not until the end of the book that we are able to hear her own story:

"Well, I ain't told this to nobody before. Maybe I ought'n to. I don't like Curley. He ain't a nice fella." "Coul'da been in the movies, an' had nice clothes – all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coul'da sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me. When they had them previews I coul'da went to them, an' spoke in the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent because I was in the pitcher." (Steinbeck, 1994, 87-88)

This monologue/dialogue (she is depicting her story for Lennie) gives an insight into who this nameless woman truly is; a woman who was looking for validation and in search for that married for the wrong reasons and as a result lost her identity. Female readers are able to relate to Curley's wife, as her feeling of hopelessness of being trapped in an unhappy marriage is perpetual. The society's normalization of a woman only being "respectable" when she lives her life as the society expects her to live and when she is only addressed in association with her husband (Mrs. ?). Just as with Crooks, Candy and even Lennie, when Curley's wife is permitted to share her story, we are given an insight into a marginalized character's point of view. It is through these marginalized characters that the condition of alienation and exploitation is revealed in the novel, allowing the reader to empathize with the characters. When each of these characters (Lennie, Crooks, Candy and Curley's wife) narrate their personal stories, the nature of their alienation is made clear. The marginalized characters in *Of Mice and Men* are also very different from each other (black, woman, old, mentally challenged), however something that they all share is their marginalized status and alienation from others.

Another important aesthetic element used by Steinbeck is the manner in which he describes the characters and their personalities. The boss, who represents the capitalist, is for instance described by means of his clothes:

He wore blue jean trousers, a flannel shirt, a black, unbuttoned vest and a black coat. His thumbs were stuck in his belt, on each side of a square steel buckle. On his head was a soiled brown Stetson hat, and he wore

high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man.

(Steinbeck, 1994, 22)

The boss appears only once in the story, described by the narrator as a capitalist who is proud of being a capitalist, using his clothes as a “status-symbol”. After this appearance, the boss is never seen again and is only mentioned briefly by the workers as a tough, old-fashioned man. Steinbeck intentionally leaves out information about the boss in order to make his point clear. If he had informed us about the boss’ background and given him a story, he would have humanized him, which is not his aim. Steinbeck’s objective is to bring out the marginalized in society, and in order to achieve this he must instead displace the center. By denying the center a voice, the author’s prime focus is on the exploited and alienated laborers who are otherwise overlooked in society. Steinbeck’s way of describing George’s and Lennie’s appearance is an example of this. He depicts George and Lennie as parallels (the clothes they are wearing), but at the same time as complete opposites (body shape and the way they carry themselves). George is described as “small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features.” while Lennie is depicted as “a huge man, shapeless face, with large, pale eyes, with sloping shoulders“ (Steinbeck, 1994, 4) This is the first description of the two protagonists, and the way they are portrayed shows that, even though these two men are complete opposites (small and big), the description indicates that they are from the same class and thus equals: Both were dressed in denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons. Both wore black, shapeless hats and both carried tight blanket rolls slung over their shoulders.

(Steinbeck, 1994, 4) The author has chosen to repeat the word *both* at the beginning of two clauses next to each other, using the rhetoric device anaphora. The purpose of anaphora is to attain a particular effect. (ELT journal, 1997) In Steinbeck’s novel the repetition of the word *both* indicates that there are no distinctions regarding the class of these characters, though in other areas they are (personality, appearance, intelligence) complete opposites. The repetition of the word *both* is a technique used by Steinbeck to emphasize the similarities these two men share beyond their appearance and intelligence. Their togetherness is represented in the uniform that most working class laborers can afford to wear. The boss, on the other hand, distinguishes himself from the laborers by wearing high-heeled boots, a Stetson hat and a belt with a steel buckle.

Steinbeck attempts to realistically portray the personalities of the characters through their actions and the other characters' descriptions of them. Curley, the boss' son, is unambiguously portrayed as a spoiled former boxer with a "little-man" complex. He is constantly trying to reassure himself and others of his strength and dominance by challenging people bigger than himself to a fight. Candy's illustration of Curley is an instance where the reader's opinion of a character is focalized by an outcast. Candy describes Curley as a "handy" man who always picks fight with bigger men, which Candy assumes is because "Kind of like he's mad at 'em because he ain't a big guy." (Steinbeck, 1994, 27-28) Just prior to Candy's description of Curley, Curley picks a fight with Lennie, a challenge that Lennie wants no part of. It is through Curley's own actions and Candy's explanation of them that the reader gets an impression of Curley. Describing the employer's son from a laborer's perspective is a method used by Steinbeck. The method allows one to perceive the world from the marginalized's perspective; it is a way to centralize the outcasts in society.

The last aesthetic element I will discuss used to bring out the outsiders in society, is Steinbeck's method of depicting the character's repression of emotions. The most evident example of this takes place at the end of the story, after George has shot Lennie in the back of his head. To prevent Lennie from being tortured by the mob, George instead liberates him with a more lenient death. However, after having committed such a heartbreaking act, George walks off without showing any great emotions. It is through his actions that the reader attains a glimpse of his true emotions: He looked steadily at his right hand that had held the gun. Slim twitched George's elbow. "Come on, George. Me an' you'll go in an' get a drink." George let himself be helped to his feet. "Yeah, a drink." (Steinbeck, 2000, 106) The first sentence indicates that George is perplexed by the act he has performed by looking at the hand that had just performed it. And the third sentence gives a hint to George's underlying emotions; he is so affected by his action that he cannot manage to stand up on his own. His lack of physical stability reveals underlying mental fragility. Instead of expressing his emotions, he digs it deep inside the unconscious. These emotions are kept in the unconscious in order to restrain them; it is easier to accept life and ideologies when we are not aware of how it actually harms us. If the laborers actually expressed their true emotions, they would become aware of their true source (capitalism) and consequently might want to change the economic base: "That system

needs to remain unconscious and imaginary, because if it were conscious, no one would go along.” (Parker, 2008, 200)

Alienation and Exploitation

The Marxist perception of society is that the economic structure is the base and the superstructure that develops from the base is politics, laws, religion and art. The relationship between the base and the superstructure is not unilateral, but instead “elements of the superstructure constantly react back upon and influence the economic base.” (Eagleton, 2002, 9) Even though the superstructure is developed from the base, the superstructure, on the other hand, is the source that ultimately influences and thus changes the base. The economic base is the mode of production while the superstructure is ideologies that reflect “the means of economic production.” (Eagleton, 2002, 5) In other words, ideologies and the way people interact and perceive each other are determined by the mode of production and the mode of production is then again influenced by ideology. It is during this endless process that the mode of production changes and is developed into a new mode of production. (Eagleton, 2002, 4-5) Slavery was developed from primitive communism, which evolved into feudalism, which eventually fostered capitalism. According to Marx, these changes are inevitable as long as there are oppressed people and classes. (Marx & Engels, 2000, 12). The migrant laborers in *Of Mice and Men* represent the oppressed and exploited working class in society. The laborers are alienated and through the process of alienation, they are also exploited by the capitalist mode of production, which Marx states is the basic source of alienation and exploitation. (Marx, 2000, 28) Capitalist ideologies in the superstructure are the result of the capitalist mode of production (the base). Marx argues that the act of reducing the laborer to the same level as a commodity is the origin of alienation. (Marx, 2000, 29)

In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck manages to depict the four features of alienation (estranged labor) maintained by Marx: Alienation from the product of the workers labor, alienation from the process of producing, alienation from species-being and finally alienation of the worker by other workers. (Marx, 2000) I will now discuss each feature of Marxist alienation, and demonstrate how the different features merge into one another and how this is manifested in *Of Mice and Men*.

The laborers in the novel work on a ranch by “bucking barley”. As a reader, one does not experience the work process itself, but instead one hears about it from the laborers themselves. Dunbar & Kravitz describe the migrant’s work experience as monotonous as well as physically demanding;

You also have to perform the same task all day, bent over with hardly ever a chance to straighten your back, your fingers travelling the same path back and forth from the plant you sack, and you have to do this without letting your legs or your mind fall asleep.

(Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 2)

Since the migrant laborer's work is monotonous, the product of their labor (barley) loses its creative meaning, thus becoming alien to the worker. The farmers do not pay attention to the plant (product) they harvest, their mission is to get the job done and in the end get paid in order to make ends meet. Labor has become merely an activity to turn the product into a commodity. When labor has reached this level, the worker is externalized from the product and is no longer able to identify with it. (Marx, 2000, 29) An example of this in *Of Mice and Men* is when George explains their dream to Lennie. He says that once they have their own farm, they will no longer be alienated from their produce. On their own farm, they would plant the nourishment needed of themselves, as well as harvest the final product themselves. The product stops being alien since "We'd know what come of our planting." (Steinbeck, 1994, 58) George and Lennie are forced to work on the ranch for an employer in order to survive in a capitalist society. The protagonists are subject to alienation from the product that they produce because they cannot relate to it. They are not part of the entire process of labor; they only experience one stage of the process, and therefore are not able to identify with the final product. Having their own farm would give them the satisfaction of participating in the entire process of labor and accordingly take pride in their finished product.

Marx declares that the product is the "means of life" produced through labor, but when alienated from the product the laborer is transformed to "a servant of his object" and loses his/her purpose in life. (Marx, 2000, 29) Being alienated from the product that is produced, the laborer is inevitably alienated from the act of producing; labor becomes external. Since labor is privatized by the capitalist, the worker can not associate with it and it becomes alien to him/her. Marx elucidates this concept with the explanation that the worker is not capable of identifying him/herself with the product as it does not belong to him/her, and consequently the worker becomes miserable at work and feels liberated when not laboring. (Marx, 2000, 30) The psychological satisfaction with "a job well done" is minimum, as the worker is reduced to wages. There are several examples in *Of Mice and Men* that illustrate the

workers' alienation from labor and can be detected through their attitudes towards work. One noticeable example is the boss' first (and only) contact with the two protagonists, George and Lennie, when they arrived a day late to their new job at the ranch. The boss does not approve of their tardiness since it makes him lose money as the workforce that day turns out to be less than he expected. "Well, I had to send out the grain teams short two buckers." (Steinbeck, 1994, 23) George and Lennie deliberately arrive a day late to their new job, because they aim to work as few days as possible before their day off. Forced labor and exploitation result in the workers' dislike of their labor, because they feel isolated and estranged by it as Marx notes:

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. (Marx, 2000, 30)

The laborers only feel truly free on Sundays when they have the day off. Sunday is the day when they are allowed three meals a day, they go to Susy's place for a drink and there they can also purchase a night with a girl.

In Marx's view, when we are alienated from work, we inevitably become alienated from our human essence: "estranged labor estranges the *species* from man." (Marx, 2000, 31) The laborers in *Of Mice and Men* are unhappy because as human beings they are not designed to be forced to produce to an extreme degree. They suppress their inner desire to live off nature and are consequently no longer linked to nature. Marx emphasizes the notion that man is part of nature and is created by nature, therefore when one is alienated from nature, one is also alienated from one's own "species-being". (Marx, 2000, 31) The migrant laborers are estranged from their human essence because they can't see the purpose of their labor. Their labor does not allow them to utilize nature to satisfy their utmost desires. Instead, labor is a part of the process of the capitalist mode of production where the laborer is reduced to a mere piece of machinery. The link between man and nature is eliminated by this process, which makes human beings feel alienated from themselves. For instance, George and Lennie dream of one day owning their own farm, with the purpose of recapturing their connection with nature. Their understanding is (which according to Marx is accurate) that once they have their own farm where they can harvest and consume the necessary

produce straight from nature, they will, as a result, be able to identify with what they produce and finally be free and happy.

Marx argues that when man is estranged from him/herself, a man also becomes estranged from fellow man:

The estrangement of man, and in fact every relationship in which man [stands] to himself, is realized and expressed only in the relationship in which a man stands to other men. Hence within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker.

(Marx, 2000, 32)

Marx's argument is that a man's perception of ownership is that if something does not belong to a person then the owner must be another person, which automatically makes the other person hostile and alien. (Marx, 2000, 33) It is at this stage of alienation that workers start to compete with each other, and this competitive work environment is generated by the capitalist lust for profit. As the result of their alienation of themselves, they unconsciously begin treating each other as objects. Workers degrade and objectify each other because it is encouraged by society; capitalist society increases degradation, since everyone must have their place in society. A telling example of this is Crooks' (the black stable buck) experience of being objectified by the other workers. 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 by his co-workers. He explains (to Lennie and Candy) that in all of his years working on the ranch, he has never had company in his room (except for the boss and Slim). In addition to not receiving any company, his company is not wanted by anyone. He is isolated and alienated by the others for the simple reason that he is not like them. Another example where the workers are alienated from one another is their lack of interest in each other – their mission is to get the job done fast. Migrant laborers are notorious for being lonely; they chose not to travel with other workers and prefer the lonely life. Due to false consciousness, the workers are to a great extent supportive of the dominant ideology developed by capitalism. Parker maintains the notion that capitalism's true nature is selfish and exploitive:

It recruits its next generation of managers by encouraging them to believe that they act out of individual selfhood, whereas the real conditions are

that individual selfhood is a delusion that makes it possible for them to act out of socially (not individually) determined motives that they remain unconscious of, oblivious to (Parker, 2008, 200).

It is not in the workers' best interest to alienate each other, but it is the result of them being alienated from their species being. As capitalism has manipulated the workers into acknowledging the dominant ideology, the workers are thus unconsciously forced into a lifestyle that is not in their best interest. The laborers are reified as mere commodities, which only intensifies alienation: "The worker's existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity." (Marx, 2000, 3)

The prime method capitalism uses to force laborers into accepting the working class life is through wages; the laborers are forced to work in order to literally survive in capitalist society. Marx calls the laborer in this sense, wage slaves. (Marx, 2000, 34) Since nearly everything is privately owned in a capitalist society, the laborers are compelled to work to gain capital to purchase commodities that originally originate from nature (food, water, shelter etc.). Nature, in capitalism, is no longer free for all man; if one wishes to utilize nature, one must first purchase it with capital.

As previously mentioned, the workers in *Of Mice and Men* are alienated through all four (Marxist) features of alienation, keeping in mind that the different features merge into one another. However, when the workers suffer from alienation they are also subjected to exploitation. Bose's definition of the Marxist term exploitation is the following:

"capitalist exploitation is, by *definition*, stated to be the pure exercise of 'coercive social power' of capital on labour, compelling the worker to perform surplus labour, so that the capitalist can make profits, in order to fulfil his 'historical mission' of accumulation." (Bose, 1980, 6)

The proprietor's constant desire for surplus value permits him/her to exploit the workers. Marx's calculations determine that, the amount of surplus value equals the degree of exploitation performed by the capitalist. (Marx, 1999, 150) In other words, the capitalist's intrinsic motive for exploiting his/her workers is to gain personal profit; the level of exploitation equals the amount of profit collected. I will now demonstrate in what way exploitation is exposed in *Of Mice and Men* by presenting a selection of examples that I will also clarify by using Marxist concepts.

The first image we get of the ranch and the housing condition, is depicted by the narrator. The scenario is set in the laborers' chamber, when Curley presents the bed that is allotted for George to sleep in: "George stepped over and threw his blankets down on the burlap sack of straw that was a mattress." (Steinbeck, 1994, 20) And George's mechanized suspicious reaction; "He leaned over and inspected the sacking closely." (Steinbeck, 1994, 21) The condition of the bed and George's immediate suspicious behavior indicates the magnitude which exploitation is normalized in society. George (as well as the other workers) is so accustomed to deception and being taken advantage of that he has to examine everything until he finally "seemed satisfied". (Steinbeck, 1994, 21) Being accustomed to sleeping in unsanitary conditions, George does not react strongly regarding the straw mattress and the bottle of toxins that kills lice lying on the mattress, for he is adapted to these kinds of surroundings. Constantly traveling from ranch to ranch that provide similar type of housing, normalizes exploitive treatment and the worker therefore is not able to relate to anything better or even desire anything better. The proprietor provides the worker with only the essentials, in order to save as much capital (to create surplus value) as possible. This results in the workers being accustomed to these types of conditions to the extent where they do not even question it. Dunbar and Kravitz depict the migrant laborer's housing condition as following;

Poor housing, however, predominates, and by "poor housing" we mean overcrowded buildings with no partitions between the bedrooms, no window screens or windows, no cabinets for food, no heater, no indoor plumbing, no running water, walls insulated with newspaper, and exposed electrical wiring. (Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 79)

Another instance where exploitation takes place in the novel is when George illustrates their dream farm to Lennie, and later on to Candy. First, his illustration indicates that the workers have been laboring long hours; "We wouldn't have to buck no barley eleven hours a day." (Steinbeck, 1994, 58) Secondly, his illustration suggests that the workers are treated as possessions by the proprietor; "We wouldn't ask nobody if we could. Jus' say, 'We'll go to her,' 'an' we would." (Steinbeck, 1994, 61) Finally, the image he portrays of their dream indicated that by attaining their dream farm they will ultimately find their true identities. "No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house." (Steinbeck, 1994, 58) George's first quote implies that the workers labor "eleven hours a day", Monday to

Saturday. Working that many hours a day leaves limited time for leisure. The laborers are forced to work excessively many hours so that the capitalist can maximize profit. Marx estimates that in order for the worker to “produce his daily labour-power” (necessary labor); the worker should labor approximately six hours a day. (Marx, 1999, 159) This means that the workers in *Of Mice and Men* labor five hours a day beyond the necessary labor (surplus labor), amounting up to 120 hours of surplus labor performed by the worker per month. The workers labor load is almost doubled by the capitalist’s thirst for personal profit. George’s second quote suggests that the workers are treated as possessions and thus objectified by the employer. As the workers labor eleven hours a day, they have limited spare time to spend as they wish. If a worker wishes to do activities that are not related to work (see the carnival as George mentioned), the worker has obligations to ask the employer for permission first. Consequently, the workers feel as private property and are treated likewise. The capitalist is blind sighted by the goal to maximize profit that he/she is capable of doing everything necessary to reach that goal, including treating fellow humans as objects and possessions. Due to their very restricted schedule, the laborers hardly have any time left to perform alternative activities; they are treated as machines with on/off buttons instead of as human beings with emotions. The final quote cited by George, confirms that the workers lose their sense of belonging and identification, as the capitalist privately owns almost everything. The laborers have a hard time identifying with where they live and their labor, since it belongs to someone else. They even struggle to identify with themselves, because as long as they are paid to work they belong to the employer as workforce. Capitalism and its mode of production allow the working class to be owned by the capitalist, since they are paid for their work. Wages are used as an excuse for the bourgeoisie’s exploitive treatment of the workers. These three quotes voiced by George depict the conditions of the workers in *Of Mice and Men* and the degree to which they are exploited. The motivation for George and Lennie’s dream of a buying a small farm, is to have a place where they are masters of their own lives and where they can live by their own rules; a place where they no longer are ruled by a proprietor.

The final selected example in *Of Mice and Men*, which illustrates exploitation by capitalist society, is when Candy explains his situation of being an injured, old laborer to George and Lennie;

“I got hurt four years ago,” he said. “They’ll can me purty soon. Jus’ as soon as I can’t swamp out no bunk houses they’ll put me on the county.”

“You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn’t no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody’d shoot me. But they won’t do nothing like that. I won’t have no place to go, an’ I can’t get no more jobs.” (Steinbeck, 1994, 58)

This quote signifies that, not only are the workers exploited by the capitalist employer but as well as by the entire capitalist society. In capitalist societies, there are no places for old and injured workers. As long as you are able to labor you are welcome in society, however the day you no longer are able to labor is the day you have outstayed you welcome. The life expectance of a migrant laborer is according to Dunbar and Kravitz 49 years: “twenty years less than the life expectancy of the average American.” (Dunbar & Kravitz, 1976, 69) As the capitalist’s main concentration, yet again, is to gain surplus value, workers are consequently exploited to the extent where they die 20 years earlier than the average person. A worker who is not able to labor only costs capital, which otherwise might have been accumulated to profit. Candy represents the periphery of the periphery; those who are at the bottom of capitalism’s class hierarchy. Candy is the proletariat who no longer is capable of doing what he is expected to do, which is to labor. As the time when Candy no longer holds a function in society has approached, Candy (and those he represents) no longer benefits capitalist society and therefore must be disposed of. The capitalist system, which the workers have yielded to, is more concerned with accumulating profit than to care for its workers. According to Marx, the capitalist system solely and utterly profits the bourgeoisie and their pockets:

Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets! Therefore, save, save, i.e., reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus value, or surplus-product into capital! Accumulate for accumulation’s sake, production for production’s sake: by this formula classic economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie, and did not for a single instant deceive itself over the birth-throes of wealth.

(Marx, 1999, 412)

Conclusion

Of Mice and Men is a powerful tale that successfully portrays the alienation and exploitation of migrant laborers who inhabit solitary lives. The laborers work eleven hours a day, six days a week in harsh conditions only to be paid insufficiently for their hard work at the end. As the workers are forced to submit to the rules of capitalism in order to survive, they are thus reified to a commodity. The mode of production designed by the capitalist allows the bourgeoisie to objectify the proletariat and the proletariat to be treated as mere workforce. A capitalist employer is only interested in maximizing profit, which naturally results in exploitation of the workers. Through long workdays, poor work conditions and low wages the workers are pushed to extreme conditions and thus exploited and objectified. Wages are used as bait to unconsciously lure the laborers into believing they work for their own sake. If workers chose not to labor, they would literally not be able to survive. The laborers are influenced and shaped by capitalism to the extent where they are unconscious of the degree to which they are alienated. It is this power over the working class that allows capitalism and its norms and rules to endure. It is only when the working class is aware of their situation and willing to collectively stop it via their own voices that capitalism ultimately can be terminated. By speaking up and revolting, Marx states, the working class has nothing to lose: Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. **Working Men of All Countries, Unite!** (Marx & Engels, 2000, 34)

The marginalized, however, can also be given a voice through art. John Steinbeck provides the marginalized with a voice through his novel. Those who otherwise are ignored, alienated and exploited are given the gift of speech. The two protagonists in the story represent the alienated and exploited proletariat in capitalist society. As other working class citizens, George and Lennie live in a society where they are positioned at the bottom of class hierarchy. They experience all four features of alienation developed by Marx, and through these types of alienation they experience exploitation by both the capitalist and capitalist society.

George and Lennie dream of a farm of their own, built on their own land and with their own hands. The significance of their dream is to finally be able to identify with something and experience the sense of belonging somewhere. Most working class people in America shared the dream of being homeowners during the depression (and even today); it was an ideology they fantasized about. Being an ideology

produced by the ruling class, the dream was mostly a fantasy and seldom a reality. Capitalism's establishment of class hierarchy hindered the working class citizens to actually experience their dream. Extreme labor demands that were not rewarded with appropriate wages ensured that the working class' possibilities of accumulating enough capital to purchase a property were non-existent. George and Lennie were never able to save sufficient capital to buy their own farm, as the collected wages were somehow never enough.

Steinbeck's representation of the marginalized in his novel is ideal; the historical setting is fitting (the Great Depression), the setting of the story is realistically fitting for that time (a farm/ranch) and the characters suit the story perfectly. These are probably some of the many reasons why this novel is a widely celebrated and a greatly loved story. The reader is able to relate to the characters and sympathize with them as they are presented as ordinary working class laborers. The characters not only narrate their personal stories but also the story of millions of working class people. Through *Of Mice and Men*, the marginalized is given a voice and their struggle is recognized. A reader can read the novel today, more than 80 years later, and still identify with the story – as long as capitalism and capitalist society remains, the story is timeless. When reading the novel one is immediately transported through time, to a place where universal themes such as alienation and exploitation are central. The way that George and the other workers feel about their job and their sense of loneliness is still relatable and relevant today. Marx, I consider, is one of the few who is able to pinpoint and explain the exploitation and alienation of laborers in capitalism in the most logical way;

And finally, the division of labour offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in natural society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood (Marx, 2000-a, 9)

REFERENCES

- Bose, Arun. *Marx on Exploitation and Inequality*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1980.
- Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream*. Oxford Press, New York, 2003.
- Dunbar, Tony & Kravitz, Linda. *Hard Traveling – Migrant Farm Workers in America*. Ballinger Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1976.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology*. Longman, London, 1994.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Preface, New York, 2002.
- Herman, Lewis & Herman, Marguerite Shalett. *American Dialects*. Routledge, New York, 1997.
- Hochschild, L. Jennifer. *Facing Up to the American Dream – Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995.
- Key concepts in ELT: Anaphora*. ELT Journal Volume 51/4. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Marx, Karl. *A Critique of The German Ideology*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 2000-a.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital – A Critique of Political Economy*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 1999.
- Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works – Volume 37*. International Publishers, New York, 1998.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 2000.

Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *Literature and Art*. International Publishers, New York, 1947.

Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org), 2000.

Nash, D. Gerald. *The Great Depression and World War II*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1979.

Parini, Jay. *John Steinbeck – An Biography*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1995.

Parker, Dale Robert. *How to Interpret Literature*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2008.

Shlomith, Rimmon-Kenan. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge, New York, 2001.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Books, New York, 1994.

Wolfram, Walt & Schilling-Estes, Natalie. *American English – Dialects and Variation*. Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts, 1998.



U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, *The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription*, 04.11.2012,
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html