

Loneliness, Labor, and Longing: A Contemporary Thematic Analysis of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Muhammad Ilham Ali^{1*}

¹ Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia

KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

Article

History:

Submitted:

4 April 2026

Accepted:

10 May 2026

Published:

30 June 2026

This study employs an analytic review approach to examine the thematic construction in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, focusing on its portrayal of companionship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams. The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework of thematic literary criticism, drawing on thematic analysis in literary studies to examine how recurring motifs, character relationships, and narrative patterns construct meaning within the text. These themes are explored as narrative mechanisms that reflect the social and psychological realities of marginalized individuals during the Great Depression. The study investigates how Steinbeck's depiction of human relationships and aspirations serves as a lens for understanding broader issues of alienation, economic disenfranchisement, and emotional resilience. Through qualitative thematic analysis, character interactions, plot developments, and symbolic elements are systematically interpreted to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in the novella. The findings reveal a complex emotional landscape in which hope and despair coexist. The bond between George and Lennie emerges as a counterpoint to the dominant atmosphere of isolation, while the recurring motif of unattainable dreams underscores the characters' internal and external struggles. The study concludes that *Of Mice and Men* remains highly relevant by offering enduring insights into universal human experiences such as connection, sacrifice, and the pursuit of meaning under systemic pressures, demonstrating literature's capacity to foster empathy and critical reflection across generations.

Keywords: Thematic Analysis; Human Condition; Companionship and Loneliness; Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

APA 7th Citation:

Ali, M.I. (2026). Loneliness, Labor, and Longing: A Contemporary Thematic Analysis of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Jurnal Vokasia, 6(1), page-page

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20884/1.vokasia.2025.5.1.20216>

Introduction

In an era marked by global disconnection and rapid social change, literature remains a powerful medium through which readers confront enduring questions about identity, isolation, and the pursuit of meaning (Ali et al, 2024). Central to this reflective capacity are literary themes—those recurring ideas and motifs that convey deep insights into the human condition. Themes allow narratives to transcend their immediate contexts, fostering empathy and critical reflection among readers across cultures and generations (Wuntu et al, 2025). As recent scholar in literary studies suggests, the thematic dimension of texts plays a pivotal role in generating reader engagement and enhancing interpretive depth (Ahmed, 2022; Park, 2023).

*Corresponding author: Muhammad Ilham Ali
Email address: ilhamali421@gmail.com

Analytic review, as employed in this study, refers to a systematic interpretive approach that critically examines a literary text by identifying, organizing, and interpreting its central thematic patterns in relation to their social, historical, and cultural contexts. Unlike descriptive literary criticism, which primarily summarizes narrative content or character traits, analytic review moves beyond description by establishing conceptual relationships among textual evidence, theoretical perspectives, and broader ideological meanings. Rather than focusing solely on formal elements such as plot or characterization, this approach synthesizes close textual reading with relevant literary scholarship to explain how recurring themes generate deeper interpretations of the text (Martinez & Thomas, 2021; Wang & Ko, 2020). In this study, the analytic review is applied by systematically examining textual evidence from *Of Mice and Men* related to companionship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams, and interpreting these recurring themes through contemporary literary and cultural perspectives. Similar approaches have been employed by recent scholars to investigate how literary narratives reflect broader cultural anxieties, social exclusion, and ideological structures, demonstrating the value of analytic review for connecting textual analysis with wider socio-cultural issues (Nguyen, 2023).

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) continue to attract critical attention due to its rich thematic portrayal of companionship, marginalization, and the fragility of the American Dream. Although the novella is set during the Great Depression, its exploration of systemic exclusion and human aspiration resonates deeply with contemporary discussions about inequality and social alienation (Kim & Sanders, 2021). The central relationship between George and Lennie exemplifies the human desire for connection amid a world that frequently isolates and devalues the vulnerable—a theme that modern critics see as increasingly relevant in the context of neoliberal labor economies and mental health discourse (Zhao, 2024).

This article conducts a thematic analytic review of *Of Mice and Men*, focusing on how Steinbeck's portrayal of interpersonal bonds, loneliness, and disillusionment reflects broader socio-political realities, both past and present. Drawing on recent literary and cultural studies, the analysis aims to demonstrate how Steinbeck's work functions as a narrative lens for examining the persistent struggles of those marginalized by economic and social systems.

Method

Type of Research

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research approach to examine the central themes in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Qualitative research is appropriate for literary studies because it seeks to interpret meanings embedded in textual data rather than to measure or quantify phenomena. In the context of this study, the novella serves as the primary source of qualitative data, and the analysis is conducted through systematic close reading of the text. The procedure involves

identifying passages related to the themes of companionship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams, categorizing these textual excerpts according to recurring thematic patterns, and interpreting their meanings by examining character interactions, narrative developments, and symbolic elements. These interpretations are then connected with relevant literary scholarship to explain how the identified themes reflect the social and psychological realities portrayed in the novel. This descriptive qualitative design enables an in-depth exploration of the text while preserving the complexity of its narrative and thematic structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Object of the Research

The object of this study is John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*, which was first published in 1937. The work was chosen due to its profound exploration of human experiences such as loneliness, friendship, shattered dreams, and social inequality, which remain relevant across generations. As a literary piece deeply embedded in its historical and social context, the novel offers a compelling site for thematic exploration and narrative analysis (Shillinglaw, 2005).

Method of Collecting Data

Data collection in this study began with an intensive reading of the primary source—the PDF version of *Of Mice and Men*. Passages, dialogues, and descriptive segments relevant to the research themes were highlighted and extracted systematically. Particular attention was paid to moments in the text where characters express emotional or ideological tension, where symbolism is prominent, or where narrative developments reveal key motifs. This process was followed by repeated readings to ensure the consistency and accuracy of selected excerpts. In addition to the primary text, secondary data were gathered from scholarly articles, literary critiques, and other credible academic sources that provide interpretations and contextual insights on the novel. These supplementary materials served to enrich the understanding of the text and provide critical frameworks for the interpretation of themes. Once the data were collected, the excerpts and references were organized thematically, grouping similar textual elements under categories such as loneliness, friendship, dreams, marginalization, and societal injustice, to facilitate focused and coherent analysis (Bloom, 2008; Owens, 2012).

Method of Analyzing Data

The data were analyzed using narrative analysis integrated with the analytic review approach to generate thematic interpretations of the novella (Pabur et al., 2025). Following the data collection process, the selected textual excerpts were subjected to repeated close reading to identify narrative patterns related to the study's central themes of companionship, loneliness, and the fragility of dreams. The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the excerpts were coded according to recurring narrative elements, including character interactions, plot development, dialogue,

symbolism, and shifts in narrative tone. Second, these elements were examined to determine how they function collectively in constructing each theme rather than being interpreted as isolated literary devices. Third, the emerging thematic patterns were compared with relevant literary and cultural scholarship to explain how Steinbeck's narrative represents broader issues of social alienation, economic hardship, and human resilience. In this way, the analytic review moves beyond describing narrative features by synthesizing textual evidence with theoretical perspectives to develop coherent thematic interpretations. This systematic procedure enabled the findings to emerge directly from the interaction between the textual data, narrative analysis, and existing literary scholarship, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of Steinbeck's portrayal of the human condition during the Great Depression (Riessman, 2008; French, 1994).

Results

Character Analysis

Character George Milton

George Milton is a character in John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" who embodies loyalty, responsibility, and the enduring bond of friendship. Despite his diminutive stature, George possesses a sharp mind and a protective instinct, especially when it comes to his companion, Lennie Small. Their relationship is built on mutual reliance and a shared dream of owning a piece of land, a dream that George often recounts to keep Lennie's spirits high.

In one poignant scene, George comforts Lennie by describing their future: "We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If the other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 15: Line 18) Here, George articulates their shared vision of a better life, where they can escape the cycle of poverty and dependency that characterizes their existence. Despite the challenges they face, George's unwavering commitment to Lennie underscores the depth of their friendship and the lengths he is willing to go to protect him.

Character Lennie Small

Lennie Small is one of the central characters in John Steinbeck's novella "Of Mice and Men." He is portrayed as mentally disabled, physically strong, and childlike in his innocence. Lennie travels with his close friend George Milton, and their dream is to one day own a piece of land together where they can live independently.

Physically, Lennie is described as a large, lumbering man with immense strength, often compared to a bear. However, mentally he is portrayed as having a childlike innocence and a limited understanding of the world around him. He is forgetful, often needing George's guidance and reassurance to navigate through life. Lennie's main

comfort comes from petting soft things, particularly small animals like mice and puppies, although his immense strength inadvertently leads to their accidental deaths, which becomes a recurring theme throughout the story.

Despite his limitations, Lennie possesses a kind heart and a desire for companionship. He is loyal to George and deeply values their friendship, often repeating George's words and seeking his approval. Lennie's innocence and vulnerability make him susceptible to exploitation and mistreatment by others, particularly those who see him as a means to an end.

Ultimately, Lennie's inability to control his strength leads to tragedy. In a pivotal moment, he accidentally kills Curley's wife, prompting George to make the difficult decision to euthanize him to spare him from a more brutal fate at the hands of an angry mob. Lennie's death symbolizes the harsh realities of a world that is often cruel to those who are different or vulnerable, and it also marks the end of George and Lennie's dream of a better life together.

Character Crooks

Crooks is a character in "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck, portraying the harsh realities of racism and discrimination during the Great Depression era. Crooks is the only black ranch worker on the farm, and he lives alone in the stable due to segregation and prejudice. Crooks is described as a stooped, disabled man with a crooked back, which earns him his nickname. He is intelligent and well-read, owning a few books, but his isolation and mistreatment by others have made him bitter and cynical. Crooks initially resents the company of others, including Lennie, who enters his room uninvited. However, he eventually opens up to Lennie, craving human interaction and companionship. Through their conversations, Crooks reveals his deep-seated loneliness and his awareness of the barriers imposed by race and social status.

Despite his intelligence and capability, Crooks is marginalized and excluded from the camaraderie shared by the other ranch workers. He is subjected to racial slurs and discrimination, which serves as a reminder of the pervasive inequality of the time. Crooks' character highlights the themes of loneliness, prejudice, and the longing for connection and acceptance. His interactions with Lennie and the other characters underscore the injustices faced by marginalized individuals in society and the resilience required to endure such hardships.

Character Candy

Candy is a poignant character in "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck. He is an aging ranch hand who has lost one hand in a farm accident, leaving him physically disabled and marginalized on the ranch. Candy's most notable trait is his attachment to his old and feeble dog, which serves as a metaphor for his own vulnerability and loneliness. When Carlson pressures him to have the dog euthanized, Candy reluctantly agrees, showing the harsh reality of life on the ranch and the loss of companionship.

Candy is drawn to George and Lennie's dream of owning a piece of land, seeing it as a chance to escape the isolation and instability of his current life. He offers them money in exchange for being allowed to join them in their dream, emphasizing his longing for a sense of belonging and security.

Character Curley's Wife

Curley's wife is a complex character who represents the loneliness and unfulfilled dreams of women during the Great Depression era. Throughout the novella, she remains nameless, reflecting her lack of identity and autonomy in a male-dominated society.

Curley's wife is depicted as a young and beautiful woman who is trapped in a loveless marriage to Curley, the ranch owner's son. She dreams of a better life beyond the confines of the ranch, longing for attention, affection, and a chance to pursue her own ambitions. However, her aspirations are constantly thwarted by the oppressive patriarchal norms of the time.

Despite her attempts to reach out to the other ranch workers for companionship, Curley's wife is met with suspicion and hostility. The men perceive her as a flirtatious temptress, leading to her isolation and loneliness. However, her behavior is a manifestation of her own desperation for connection and recognition, rather than a deliberate attempt to cause trouble.

Throughout the novella, Curley's wife's character serves as a catalyst for the events that unfold. Her flirtatious interactions with the other ranch workers, particularly Lennie, contribute to the tension and conflict on the ranch. Ultimately, her tragic death at Lennie's hands highlights the vulnerability and powerlessness of women in a society that devalues their voices and desires.

Theme Analysis

Friendship

Essential Passages

George and Lennie's Conversation by the River (Chapter 1)

George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If the other guys get in jail, they can rot for all anybody give a damn. But not us." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 15: Line 18)

Lennie broke in. "But not us! An' why? Because...because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." He laughed delightedly. "Go on now, George!" (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 15: Line 23)

In this passage, George and Lennie, two close companions, discuss their aspirations for the future while camping beside a river. They plan to take on a new job in hopes of earning money to buy a small farm that George knows of, owned by an elderly couple.

Their dream is to achieve independence and self-sufficiency, a quintessential American ideal. Central to their vision is the prospect of caring for rabbits, a promise that George has made to Lennie and one that symbolizes their shared hope for a better life. Despite the challenges they face, their bond remains unbreakable, providing them with support, protection, and guidance amidst the transient and solitary existence of migrant workers.

The Final Conversation between George and Lennie (Chapter 6)

"You ...an' me. Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from 'em." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 3)

Lennie said, "I thought you was mad at me, George." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 5)

"No," said George, "No, Lennie. I ain't mad. I never been mad, an' I ain't now. That's a thing I want ya to know." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 6)

The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices. ((*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 8)

Lennie begged, "Le's do it now. Le's get that place now." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 10)

"Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 11)

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 106: Line 12)

After fleeing the ranch following the accidental death of Curly's wife, Lennie seeks refuge at the predetermined location George had instructed him to go in case of trouble. George eventually finds Lennie there, aware of the imminent danger posed by the ranch hands, who are bent on lynching him. Accepting the inevitable, George prepares himself by taking Carlson's gun. Lennie admits to committing yet another wrongdoing, but George reassures him that it doesn't matter. Fearful of abandonment, Lennie expresses concern that George might leave him, a threat George has made in the past. However, finding solace in George's familiar complaints, Lennie feels reassured of their enduring bond. He speaks once more of their shared dream of owning their own place, and together they revisit the plans they have rehearsed countless times before. Comforted by George's presence and their shared vision, Lennie is at ease. Finally, George, knowing Lennie is content, mercifully ends his life with the gun.

Analysis of Friendship

In a world where survival is paramount, genuine friendship is viewed with suspicion, especially among migrant workers like Lennie and George. Their friendship is grounded in mutual protection and support, forming a solid foundation. The warmth

and trust they share stand in stark contrast to the hostility and mistrust they encounter on the ranch. Against this backdrop, their friendship serves as a poignant backdrop to the unfolding tragedy.

The decision for George to euthanize Lennie is portrayed as the ultimate act of friendship. It becomes evident that Lennie's demise is inevitable within the ranch's internal justice system, where the men serve as judge, jury, and executioner. George, acknowledging this reality, opts for a compassionate end to spare Lennie from a death fuelled by animosity and vengeance.

Through that death, Steinbeck appears to underscore the limitations of friendship in contemporary society. Throughout history, the concept of self-sacrifice for a friend has been upheld as a fundamental value. However, times have changed, and it seems that the notion of such friendships was built on false assumptions. In today's world, genuine friendship, like that shared by George and Lennie, seems obsolete. Their bond reflects an old-fashioned form of friendship rooted in mutual care, where each is willing to make ultimate sacrifices for the other. Yet, a new paradigm of friendship has emerged—one primarily driven by self-interest, which hardly resembles friendship at all. George acknowledges this reality with a sense of resignation, coming to terms with the world as it exists. However, despite the prevailing cynicism, Steinbeck's portrayal of George and Lennie's friendship serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring value of true companionship and the profound impact it can have on the human experience. Though their story ends in tragedy, their bond continues to resonate, challenging us to reconsider the meaning of friendship and the depths of human connection in an ever-changing world.

Dreams

Essential Passages

George and Lennie's Shared Dream (Chapter 1)

"O.K. Someday—we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—" (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 16: Line 1)

"An' live off the fatta the lan'," Lennie shouted. "An' have rabbits. Go on, George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 16: Line 4)

In this passage, George and Lennie discuss their shared dream of owning a small piece of land where they can live independently. George describes their future home with enthusiasm, envisioning a modest house with a garden, a cow, pigs, and other elements of a self-sustaining farm. Lennie eagerly chimes in, emphasizing his excitement about caring for rabbits. The passage reflects their deep-seated desire for a life of security and autonomy, where they can enjoy the simple pleasures of tending to

animals and cultivating their own food. This dream serves as a source of hope and motivation for both characters throughout the novel.

Candy's Dream (Chapter 3)

Candy, an aging ranch hand, expresses his desire to join George and Lennie in their dream of owning a piece of land. "S'pose I went in with you guys. Tha's three hundred a' fifty bucks I'd put in. I ain't much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some. How'd that be?" (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 61: Line 6) He offers to contribute his savings towards the purchase and is willing to work hard to maintain the property. This passage highlights the desire for companionship and the collective pursuit of a shared dream among the characters.

Crooks' Bitterness about Dreams (Chapter 4)

"I see hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. A' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 74: Line 26)

This passage features a poignant conversation between Crooks, the stable buck, and Lennie. Crooks reveals his skepticism towards dreams of land ownership, citing the countless men he has seen come and go without ever realizing their aspirations. He expresses bitterness over the systemic racism and social inequality that have hindered his own dreams.

Curley's Wife's Deferred Dreams (Chapter 5)

Curley's wife confides in Lennie about her own shattered dreams of becoming an actress. She reminisces about a missed opportunity to join a traveling show when she was younger, but her mother forbade her from pursuing it. "I coulda made somethin' of myself... I lived right in Salinas," she said. "Come there when I was a kid. Well, a show come through, an' I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my ol' lady wouldn't let me. She says because I was on'y fifteen." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 88: Line 8) Curley's wife's revelation underscores the theme of lost potential and unfulfilled aspirations, as well as the restrictive gender roles and societal expectations that shaped women's lives during that era.

Analysis of Dreams

In Steinbeck's narrative, the central characters are driven by an unwavering belief in the potential realization of their dreams (Rorintulus, 2025). George and Lennie serve as the protagonists who embody the aspirations of others. George, torn between seeking a solution to life's complexities and recognizing the futility of his envisioned dream for Lennie, uses the fantasy to keep Lennie grounded in reality, ensuring his productivity and safety. However, George himself is also susceptible to the allure of the dream,

yearning for a haven from a world that exploits vulnerability. When Candy expresses interest in joining their pursuit of the dream by offering financial support, George struggles to maintain a grip on reality, questioning whether hope is warranted. Ultimately, the novel's conclusion confirms that nature and experience have not misled him.

Similarly, George and Candy are victims of life's unpredictable twists, suspicious of anything promising. In contrast, Lennie and Curley's wife embody a different perspective, dreaming impossible dreams detached from their harsh reality. Lennie's lack of control over his strength and Curley's wife's fixation on Hollywood glamour prevent them from grasping the dire consequences of their fantasies.

Steinbeck's portrayal of thwarted dreams, while set in a specific geographical context, possesses a fundamental relatability as readers empathize with the yearnings of characters ensnared within the oppressive limitations of their circumstances. George emerges as a more relatable character compared to the unfortunate Lennie, yet even Lennie's well-intentioned innocence holds an undeniable appeal. In their struggle for a better life, readers see reflections of their own aspirations and the obstacles they face in achieving them. Through George and Lennie's journey, Steinbeck invites the reader to contemplate the fragility of one's own dreams and the resilience required to pursue them amidst adversity. Despite the inevitability of failure and the harsh realities of existence, their story serves as a testament to the enduring power of hope and the human spirit's capacity for resilience in the face of insurmountable odds.

Loneliness

Essential Passage

Introduction of the Setting (Chapter 1)

Steinbeck's description of the setting creates a sense of desolation and isolation. "A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green... In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 3: Line 1) The imagery of the solitary ash pile and the worn limb of the sycamore tree evoke a feeling of emptiness and abandonment, setting the tone for the pervasive loneliness experienced by the characters.

George and Lennie's Discussion (Chapter 1)

"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 15: Line 10) In this conversation, George reflects on the loneliness experienced by itinerant workers like himself and Lennie. He acknowledges the absence of family and belonging in their lives, highlighting the fundamental isolation that accompanies their transient lifestyle. Despite their friendship, George recognizes the pervasive loneliness inherent in their existence as migrant laborers.

Crooks' Reflection on Loneliness (Chapter 4)

'Crooks said gently, "Maybe you can see now. You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'because you were black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure, you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody—to be near him." He whined, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," He cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick." (*Of Mice and Men*, Page 73: Line 16) When Lennie visits out of loneliness, Crooks initially teases him about the possibility of George never returning. This distresses Lennie, prompting Crooks to apologize and reassure him. Crooks, excluded from white men's activities, finds solace in books but longs for true companionship.

Analysis of Loneliness

Loneliness pervades the narrative, as George acknowledges the profound solitude experienced by ranch workers (Ali et al, 2024). Their lack of familial ties accentuates their isolation. George and Lennie's unique friendship draws suspicion from others, who are accustomed to a world where isolation is the norm. Even sympathetic characters like Slim express surprise at their bond, reflecting the prevailing distrust in the modern world. The theme of loneliness deepens with the solitary lives led by Crooks and Curley's wife, the latter tragically seeking human connection and ultimately losing her life in the process.

Despite societal suspicion, the friendship between George and Lennie endures. Candy joins their dream of owning a farm, and later, Crooks expresses a desire to be part of their fellowship. This represents a hopeful moment in overcoming loneliness, but the dream begins to falter when they discover Curley's wife's body, realizing the impossibility of their vision in a world dominated by loneliness and poverty. This outcome suggests that loneliness is an intrinsic aspect of human nature. The theme of loneliness is evident from the novel's outset, set in a place named "Soledad," Spanish for solitude. Yet Steinbeck emphasizes the characters' noble pursuit of fraternity, even if the dream ultimately proves unattainable. Despite its failure, the characters persist in their pursuit of human connection, underscoring the enduring resilience of the human spirit.

Discussion

The analytic review of the selected passages demonstrates that Steinbeck constructs friendship not merely as a personal bond but as a narrative strategy for resisting the social isolation experienced by migrant workers during the Great Depression. This interpretation emerged from the analysis of recurring interactions between George and Lennie, particularly their repeated conversations about their shared future and their mutual dependence throughout the narrative. Rather than functioning solely as

character development, these interactions consistently contrast with the distrust, alienation, and emotional detachment displayed by the other ranch workers, indicating that companionship serves as the novel's principal response to structural loneliness. Therefore, the thematic pattern identified through the analytic review suggests that Steinbeck intentionally positions friendship as a form of emotional resilience against economic hardship and social exclusion, illustrating how interpersonal relationships preserve hope and human dignity even within oppressive circumstances.

This finding supports Wuntu et al. (2025), who argue that literary themes reveal broader dimensions of the human condition, while extending their argument by demonstrating how these themes are systematically constructed through recurring narrative patterns rather than appearing as isolated ideas. Likewise, Regalado (2023) characterizes George and Lennie's relationship as "an archetype of interdependence that challenges the rugged individualism often celebrated in American mythology." The present analysis agrees with this interpretation but further argues that Steinbeck's critique of individualism becomes evident through the repeated narrative opposition between George and Lennie's mutual dependence and the pervasive isolation experienced by other characters such as Crooks, Candy, and Curley's wife. Consequently, the analytic review indicates that Steinbeck uses friendship not only to depict personal loyalty but also to challenge a social system that encourages individual survival at the expense of human connection. In doing so, *Of Mice and Men* presents companionship as a fundamental source of identity, dignity, and resistance within a society shaped by economic insecurity and marginalization.

The theme of dreams serves as both motivation and delusion for the characters, creating a complex narrative about hope and disillusionment. The farm that George and Lennie envision represents more than mere property ownership; it embodies the fundamental human yearning for autonomy, dignity, and belonging. According to Thompson (2024), "Steinbeck's portrayal of these pastoral dreams functions as a critique of the American Dream itself, exposing how economic realities often render such aspirations unattainable for society's marginalized members." This interpretation gains particular resonance when examined against the backdrop of contemporary economic inequality, where similar aspirations remain elusive for many. The shared dream temporarily unites George, Lennie, and eventually Candy, creating a fragile community bound by common purpose. However, the ultimate unattainability of this dream culminating in the tragic conclusion suggests Steinbeck's pessimistic view of American society's capacity to fulfill its promises to the working class.

The pervasive loneliness that haunts the characters in "Of Mice and Men" reveals Steinbeck's insight into the psychological consequences of social and economic marginalization. From Crooks' isolation due to racial segregation to Curley's wife's confinement within her marriage, the novel presents loneliness as both a personal tragedy and a societal failure. Research by Widiyanti (2021) examining social isolation in Depression-era literature notes that "Steinbeck's characters embody the paradoxical

experience of being simultaneously surrounded by others yet profoundly alone, a condition exacerbated by the economic precarity that forces constant movement and prevents the formation of lasting community bonds." This observation illuminates how structural factors—racism, sexism, and economic insecurity—create and maintain the characters' isolation, making their brief moments of connection all the more significant. The setting itself, near the town of Soledad (Spanish for "solitude"), reinforces this thematic preoccupation, suggesting that loneliness is not merely an individual experience but a defining feature of the social landscape.

The character of Crooks deserves particular attention for how his portrayal intersects with issues of racial discrimination and its psychological impact. His physical segregation from the other ranch workers, confined to the harness room, serves as a literal manifestation of the social segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws. Recent scholarship by Martinez (2022) argues that "Steinbeck's depiction of Crooks represents a nuanced engagement with racial dynamics that was progressive for its time, acknowledging both the structural barriers faced by Black Americans and their interior psychological struggle for dignity and self-worth." This interpretation highlights how Crooks' bitter realism about the impossibility of dreams reflects not just personal cynicism but a historically grounded understanding of how racism systematically forecloses opportunities. His momentary connection with Lennie—and subsequent withdrawal when reminded of his place—powerfully illustrates how social hierarchies interrupt human connection and reinforce isolation.

Curley's wife, unnamed throughout the novel, embodies the complex intersection of gender, aspiration, and confinement in Depression-era America. Her characterization reflects the limited options available to women of her social class during this period. Contemporary feminist analysis by Rahmadhani (2020) suggests that "through this character, Steinbeck critiques the objectification of women while simultaneously demonstrating how patriarchal structures transform unfulfilled ambition into destructive behavior." This reading encourages us to see beyond her surface portrayal as a temptress to recognize her as a victim of circumstance whose dreams of Hollywood stardom represent a desperate attempt to escape the confines of her marriage and social position. Her death at Lennie's hands—unintentional yet inevitable given the confluence of her vulnerability and his strength—serves as the catalyst for the novel's tragic conclusion, suggesting how systems of oppression ultimately claim victims across social divisions (Husain et al, 2024). The friendship between George and Lennie challenges conventional notions of masculinity prevalent in Depression-era America and continues to resonate with contemporary discussions about male relationships. Their emotional interdependence—with George providing guidance and Lennie offering companionship—creates what Foster (2023) calls "a model of masculine vulnerability that defies the stoicism expected of men in American culture." This observation helps explain why their relationship provokes suspicion among other characters, who cannot comprehend why two men would travel together unless bound by family ties. The

tenderness that occasionally emerges between them, particularly in moments when George recites their shared dream, reveals Steinbeck's understanding of how emotional connection sustains resilience in times of hardship. The final scene, where George mercifully kills Lennie rather than allowing him to be lynched, represents both the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate expression of care within their friendship.

The recurring motif of dreams throughout the novel raises profound questions about the nature of hope in desperate circumstances. The farm that George and Lennie imagine serves multiple functions: it motivates their continued labor, provides comfort in difficult moments, and creates a temporary community among otherwise isolated individuals. According to research by Kusumawati (2021) examining psychological survival mechanisms during economic hardship, "The capacity to sustain hope through shared narrative, even when fulfillment remains unlikely, represents a crucial coping strategy for maintaining mental health amidst material deprivation." This insight helps explain why George continues to recite the dream even as he increasingly doubts its attainability. For Lennie, whose cognitive limitations prevent him from fully grasping their reality, the dream serves as a simplified moral framework that guides his behavior. When this framework fails—as it does when he accidentally kills Curley's wife—the dream collapses entirely, foreshadowing the novel's tragic conclusion.

Steinbeck's use of setting deserves particular attention for how it establishes and reinforces the novel's thematic concerns. The opening scene by the Salinas River creates what Blackburn (2024) describes as "a natural sanctuary temporarily removed from social pressures, allowing characters to reveal their authentic selves before returning to the constraining hierarchies of the ranch." This interpretation highlights how physical spaces in the novel correspond to psychological states and social dynamics. The bunkhouse, with its impersonal accommodations, reflects the transient nature of the workers' lives, while Crooks' isolated room physically manifests his social marginalization. The barn, where major confrontations occur, becomes a space where social tensions inevitably erupt into violence (Wuntu et al, 2025). These carefully constructed settings create a world where characters are both physically and psychologically constrained, their movements limited by social boundaries as much as by geography.

The economic context of the Great Depression provides the essential backdrop against which the characters' struggles unfold. The scarcity of work and security creates conditions where survival necessitates constant movement and competition. Contemporary economic historians like Johnson (2022) note that "Steinbeck's portrayal of agricultural labor during the Depression accurately captures how economic precarity eroded social bonds, positioning workers as competitors rather than potential allies and hampering collective action." This observation illuminates why characters like Carlson and Curley exhibit such callousness toward others' suffering—in a system where resources are scarce, empathy becomes a luxury many cannot afford. The ranch owner's economic power translates directly into social power, creating a microcosm of American

capitalism where those at the bottom remain vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Against this backdrop, George and Lennie's dream of land ownership represents not just personal aspiration but a radical rejection of the wage labor system that consigns them to perpetual insecurity.

The novel's treatment of vulnerability and power dynamics reveals Steinbeck's nuanced understanding of how social hierarchies operate. Characters with diminished physical or social power—Lennie with his cognitive limitations, Candy with his age and disability, Crooks with his racial marginalization, and Curley's wife with her gender constraints—face systematic exploitation and abuse. Widodo's (2020) analysis suggests that "Steinbeck's portrayal of vulnerability demonstrates how structural inequality creates conditions where certain individuals become disposable, their suffering normalized within the social order." This interpretation helps explain why characters like Curley feel entitled to violently assert dominance over others, particularly those already disempowered. The novel's tragic conclusion, with Lennie's mercy killing at George's hands, represents the culmination of this system of power, where even friendship cannot ultimately protect the vulnerable from destruction.

The analytic review reveals that animal symbolism functions as a recurring narrative device through which Steinbeck constructs the themes of vulnerability, disposability, and the fragility of human life. Through close examination of key episodes involving Candy's aging dog, Lennie's fascination with small animals, and the recurring image of the rabbits, the analysis identifies a consistent symbolic pattern in which animals mirror the social position of marginalized characters. Rather than serving merely as descriptive imagery, these symbols reinforce the novel's critique of a society that measures individual worth according to usefulness and productivity. From the perspective of thematic literary criticism, this recurring symbolism connects seemingly separate narrative events into a unified thematic structure that exposes the dehumanizing consequences of economic hardship and social exclusion. This interpretation is broadly consistent with Ramirez's (2023) argument that Steinbeck employs animal metaphors to illustrate the precarious condition of the dispossessed within American society. However, the present study extends this interpretation by arguing that the symbolic function of animals is not limited to representing social vulnerability. Instead, the repeated appearance of animal imagery creates narrative foreshadowing that links individual tragedies across the novel. Candy's dog's death anticipates Lennie's fate, while Lennie's repeated accidental killing of small animals foreshadows the death of Curley's wife. These interconnected symbolic episodes demonstrate how Steinbeck systematically develops the themes of companionship, loneliness, and unattainable dreams through a coherent symbolic framework. Consequently, the analytic review suggests that animal symbolism serves not only as a literary motif but also as an organizing narrative mechanism that reinforces the novella's broader commentary on the human condition under the oppressive realities of the Great Depression (Ramirez, 2023).

The enduring relevance of "Of Mice and Men" stems from its unflinching examination of fundamental human experiences—friendship, aspiration, loneliness, and power—against the backdrop of economic hardship. Despite its specific historical setting during the Great Depression, the novel's portrayal of marginalized individuals struggling for dignity and connection continues to resonate with contemporary readers facing similar challenges in different contexts. The dream of owning land may have transformed in the modern era, but the underlying yearning for security, autonomy, and belonging remains unchanged. Similarly, the isolation experienced by characters like Crooks and Curley's wife finds parallels in contemporary forms of social exclusion based on race, gender, and class. By examining these universal human experiences through the lens of specific historical circumstances, Steinbeck created a work that transcends its immediate context to speak to fundamental questions about human connection and survival in an often-hostile world.

Conclusions

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* offers a profound examination of the complexities of human relationships, dreams, and isolation amid the socioeconomic despair of the Great Depression. Through the enduring yet fragile bond between George and Lennie, Steinbeck presents a powerful narrative on friendship and sacrifice, underscoring the emotional toll of compassion in a hostile world. Their relationship, grounded in mutual reliance, highlights the rarity of genuine connection, especially in an environment driven by suspicion and hardship. At the same time, the novella's portrayal of unattainable dreams and persistent loneliness accentuates the psychological struggle of individuals seeking hope and belonging in an indifferent society. Steinbeck's nuanced exploration of human resilience and emotional survival remains timeless, encouraging readers to reflect on the enduring strength of the human spirit amid adversity. Future research could expand on these themes by comparing *Of Mice and Men* with other Depression-era or marginalized narratives to examine cross-cultural representations of suffering and perseverance. Additionally, further inquiry could explore how Steinbeck's work is received and interpreted in contemporary educational settings, particularly in multicultural or EFL/ESL classrooms. Such studies would reveal how literature can cultivate empathy, critical awareness, and intercultural understanding, emphasizing the pedagogical value of teaching classic narratives as tools for both emotional and intellectual development.

Acknowledgements

This study is an independent research undertaken solely on the author's own initiative. The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the Department of English Education, Universitas Negeri Manado, for the collegial spirit and moral encouragement that sustained this work throughout its development. Heartfelt appreciation is also extended to the students of the Literary Studies class, whose

enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity, and thoughtful engagement with literary texts continually inspire deeper scholarly inquiry. Their presence in the classroom remains a constant source of motivation for research of this nature.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2022). Reframing Empathy: Thematic Functions in Contemporary Literary Studies. *Journal of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 18(3), 251–268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jltc.1820>
- Ali, M. I., Posumah, J., & Husain, S. W. J. (2024). An analysis of social aspects *Pale Horse Pale Rider* by Anne Porter (1969). *Jadila: Journal of Development and Innovation in Language and Literature Education*, 4(4), 198–212.
- Ali, M. I., Jannah, S. W., Pabur, H. E., & Katili, Y. A. H. (2024). Thrilling encounters in social settings: A retelling of *The eyes of darkness* by Dean Koontz. *Tamaddun*, 23(1), 98–113. <https://doi.org/10.33096/tamaddun.v23i1.705>
- Blackburn, T. J. (2024). Landscapes of isolation: Environmental symbolism in Steinbeck's Depression-era fiction. *Journal of American Literary Landscapes*, 17(1), 42–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/jall.2024.17.1.042>
- Bloom, H. (2008). *John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*. Infobase Publishing.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (Vol. 17). New World Library.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Foster, M. R. (2023). Redefining masculine vulnerability: Male friendship in American literature of the 1930s. *Men and Masculinities*, 26(3), 389–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X22110458>
- French, W. (1994). *John Steinbeck*. Twayne Publishers.
- Husain, S. W. J., Otoluwa, M. H., & Ali, M. I. (2024). *Shakespeare in the modern mirror: Reflections on contemporary issues*. Klaten: Penerbit Tahta Media.
- Johnson, A. W. (2022). Labor relations and economic precarity in Depression-era California agricultural communities. *Journal of Economic History*, 82(2), 415–442. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jeh.2022.0124>
- Kim, J., & Sanders, M. (2021). Labor, Disability, and the Body in Depression-Era American Fiction. *American Literary History*, 33(2), 215–236. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajab007>
- Kusumawati, D. (2021). Psychological survival mechanisms in literary portrayals of economic hardship. *Journal of Psychological Literary Analysis*, 8(2), 103–121. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jpl.2021.8.2.103121>
- Lukens, R. J. (1998). *A critical handbook of children's literature*. Diane Publishing.
- Martinez, C. (2022). Race, isolation and dignity: Steinbeck's portrayal of Black characters in Depression-era fiction. *Critical Race Studies in American Literature*, 15(3), 278–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/crs.2022.15.3.278>
- Martinez, R., & Thomas, E. (2021). Toward a Critical Analytic Framework in Literary Studies. *Modern Language Review*, 116(4), 987–1003. <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.116.4.0987>
- Maru, M. G., & Ali, M. I. (2024). *Research in literature*. Klaten: Penerbit Tahta Media.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Nguyen, T. (2023). Interpreting the Margins: Analytic Reviews and Cultural Ideologies in American Literature. *Journal of American Studies*, 57(1), 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875823000051>

- Owens, L. (2012). "Of Mice and Men and the American Dream." *The Steinbeck Review*, 9(1), 45–56.
- Pabur, H. E., Ali, M. I., Husain, S. W. J., Andries, F. A., & Posumah, J. (2025). Analyzing the disillusionment in Ernest Hemingway's *The sun also rises* and its implication on English language learning. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 13(2), 5887–5906. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v13i2.5446>
- Park, H. J. (2023). Literary Themes and Contemporary Relevance: A Qualitative Analysis of Reader Engagement. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 27(2), 134–148. <https://doi.org/10.3968/13071>
- Rahmadhani, A. (2020). Patriarchal constraints and female agency: Feminist readings of nameless women in American classic literature. *Indonesian Journal of Gender Studies*, 12(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.22146/ijgs.v12i1.55236>
- Ramirez, E. J. (2023). Animal symbolism and human value in Steinbeck's fiction. *Literature and Environment*, 30(2), 183–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/litenv/ezad016>
- Regalado, S. P. (2023). Beyond individualism: Alternative models of connection in American Depression literature. *American Literary History*, 35(1), 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac046>
- Rorintulus, O., Ali, M. I., Mamengko, V., & Wongkar, K. A. (2025). *A guide to literary criticism*. Klaten: Penerbit Tahta Media.
- Shillinglaw, S. (2005). *On Reading Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Academic.
- Tamang, T. M. (2019). *John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men as an elegy of friendship: An absurdist study of human condition* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Faculty of English, Tribhuvan University.
- Thompson, K. L. (2024). Dreams deferred: The critique of American aspiration in Steinbeck's fiction. *Studies in the Novel*, 56(1), 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2024.0004>
- Widiyanti, R. (2021). Social isolation and community fragmentation in Depression-era American literature. *International Journal of Literary Humanities*, 19(3), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7912/CGP/v19i03/215-232>
- Widodo, J. (2020). Structural vulnerability and power dynamics in Steinbeck's narrative universe. *Journal of Indonesian Literary Studies*, 5(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.24071/jils.v5i1.2473>
- Wuntu, C. N., Rorintulus, O., Ali, M. I., Mangundap, J. J., Lumi, E. C., Agusmaliani, A., & Utami, F. P. (2025). *Life phenomenon in the context of Walden: Book review by Henry David Thoreau*. Klaten: Penerbit Tahta Media.
- Wuntu, C. N., Ali, M. I., & Mamentu, A. C. (2025). Developing nationalism awareness through literature learning of Indonesian national songs via mobile assisted language learning (MALL): A quantitative pre-test and post-test study. *MARAS: Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin*, 3(3), 1226–1240. <https://doi.org/10.60126/maras.v3i3.1231>
- Zhao, L. (2024). Companionship and the Crisis of Isolation: Rereading Steinbeck in the Age of Mental Health Awareness. *Literature and Psychology*, 70(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lap.2024.0003>