

Arif Uddin

Professor Von Uhl

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Of Mice And Men - Lennie's Illness Or Masquerade?

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men*, offers a prime example of how mental deformities can impact one's decision making and awareness of everyday situations. Throughout the protagonist's journey, readers see multiple hints of abnormalities in Lennie's actions as his prolonged exposure leaves him inept to an independent lifestyle. One can further understand and connect to these developments with regards to the article "Madness and Masquerade" written by Michael Deporte. Deporte briefly goes over multiple scenarios in which "madness" may have been overlooked as a simple "masquerade" (act), hence the title of the work. In relation to *Of Mice And Men*, using the different ideologies Deporte has put together in regards to this distinction, it is definitely evident to claim the protagonist, Lennie did in fact have some form of mental illness, although it may not have been explicitly stated.

Initially the overall plot of this reading is about two close old time friends, George and Lennie - who advert from one job to another due to the reconcuring incidents caused by Lennie. Other than his usual abnormal behavior, in many situations Lennie is described as socially immature and often absent-minded. Nonetheless, these incidents include moments such as where Lennie has attempted to comfort animals. Unbeknownst to him his comforting touch was too aggressive, ultimately leading to the deaths of these animals. Lennie's actions divulge from

caressing animals to that of something far worse. Eventually the day comes where George can no longer protect Lenny and unfortunately has to be the one to end it for him.

Withal, the events which occur throughout the novel can be correlated to the same ideas Deporte discusses in his paper, “Madness and Masquerade”. In the article, Deporte illustrates multiples propositions, all which connect to the overall concept of the distinction between being psychologically “mad” and then the simple act of it. He introduces this theory by providing the reader with a basic metaphor,

“Whether someone is crazy like a fox or crazy as a loon is profoundly unsettling question because it raises doubts about our ability to make the fundamental distinction between madness and sanity. There is a world of difference between foxes and loons ; not knowing which we’re dealing with can be very dangerous” (Deporte,636).

Deporte continues to elaborate on this conjecture by providing both factual examples and also written pieces of work that clearly illustrate this concept. The first example he uses is John Hinckley: “How could the man who shot President Reagan on live tv get off without doing time in jail?”(Deporte, 637). Hinckley had plead insanity which reduced his prosecution. Of course many had still believed he “was less disturbed than he was clever”(Deporte,637). As a result the distinction between Hinkley being a sociopath or a schizophrenic remained unanswered (Deporte,637). Deporte uses this case to better establish the foundations of the McNaughton rule (Deporte,637). In his research paper he discusses the 1843 trial of Daniel McNaughtan. Just as John Hinckley, McNaughtan was a scottish tradesman, who had fatally shot sir Robert Peel's

secretary, whom he mistook for the prime minister himself. However ironically, the court ruled in favor of the defense because they argued McNaughtan was “mad as hatter”(Deporte, 637) and could not be held responsible for an act done under the influence of his psychosis. But with a further look into McNaughtans history, it was found that he had actually taken courses in natural philosophy which most certainly would have included the study of mental disorders, hence it is easily arguable if this was simply all just an act, a masquerade (Deporte,637). Nonetheless, Deporte also provides examples in different novels which present this same principle of simple Masquerades being overlooked as Madness and vice versa. An example would be, the character of Hamlet. One of many in classic literature that illustrate the difficulty in distinguishing con men from mad men. Here , he explains how there are multiple perspectives to view the story, for instance

“Looked at one way, Hamlet's apology is the best he can offer without blowing his cover. Viewed in another way, Hamlet seems to realize that his “antic disposition” was not entirely put on,that there were moments - the killing of Polonius among them- when he was genuinely out of control”(Deporte, 638).

Thus heavily drawing a comparison to that of McNaughtan , Hinckley and Hamlet , whom all participate in theatrical acts of delusion. Highlighting Deporte’s main point that the distinction between real madness and that of an act is indistinguishable without pretense.

One can find that Steinbeck's work implements Depoerte’s ideologies.As seen from the start of the novel, Lennie is promptly described as "A huge man, shapeless of face, with large,

pale eyes... he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little."(Steinbeck, 2) in comparison to his companion George, who was "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features."(Steinbeck, 2) Generally speaking Steinbeck may have chose these choice of words simply to provide readers with a better sense to visualize the character. However one can see with further analyze that these attributes align to a very common disorder, down syndrome. Although this is not evident enough to label Lenny with a mental disorder, as Steinbeck continues off by introducing his character with him drinking straight out of a green pool.

"His huge companion dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse."(Steinbeck, 2).

It is coherent how Steinbeck foreshadows future events by immediately giving the reader a better understanding of Lenny as a whole. As the chapters go on, Lennie's actions begin to get more explicit, from being unusual to simply inhumane. On the their journey to find new work, George began to notice Lennie's odd behavior as he continued to play with something in his pockets - which he soon finds out is a dead mouse that Lennie had been carrying around for "comfort". Although Lenny had claimed to find the mouse dead before he had taken it, it immediately adds to his eccentric characteristics. Of course, George makes him dispose of it once he found out, but then Lenny went behind his back and kept it. This continues on up till chapter 5 when he accidentally kills a puppy. After the incident he does not necessarily understand that what he did was wrong but merely fears the consequences he would face if his good ol' pal George was to find out. Hence he tries to hide the evidence leading to the climax of

the novel. Nonetheless after doing so, Lenny had no one to seek help from and so he had went to the one person he was distinctly told not to go to, the boss's son's (Curley's) wife. To describe her in one word would be, trouble. In the opening of the novel both Lennie and George were told she had the "eye" which in other words meant she was a flirt. This section of the novel is very important to consider when thinking about whether or not Lenny actually does indeed suffer from some form of mental illness. It is very palpable he did not have the intentions of causing any harm to these animals, let alone kill them. Lenny was simply unaware of his rough touch. Any how, not moments later after the situation with the departed puppy, she soon realized Lennie meant no harm and so she comforted him by telling him it's okay. How she herself even enjoys stroking her hair for the soft texture. And so as a reader one can already sense the dangerous occurrence that is about to befall. She had offered Lennie to have a feel, and sure enough just as with the animals, he went overboard. Eventually Curley's wife began to scream and Lennie, not wanting George to hear, covers her mouth and nose. As she continued to struggle, Lennie grew angry and demanded her to be quiet.

“ He shook her then, and he was angry with her. “Don't you go yellin' ,” he said, and he shook her; and her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still, for Lennie had broken her neck”(Steinbeck, 45).

All in all, although Steinbeck may not have explicitly stated whether the protagonist, Lennie has a mental illness or not; by looking further deep into the text one can easily argue he does. Throughout the development of the character himself we see multiple attributes that can

explain/justify his doings. Unlike the examples Deporte mentions in his article, where the specific individuals are described as mischievous and simply vile, Lennie is rather depicted as an unaware and inarticulate personage.

Works Cited

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