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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Presence of the American Dream in
John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract:

This dissertation aims to explore the presence and importance of the American Dream in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. Emphasizing the elements of freedom and hope related to it. Firstly, making an analysis of the protagonists' 'a coupla acres' dream, as a version of the American Dream, and its relationship with a desire for freedom, change and escape. It will also be discussed how the dream creates and instigates hope, as well as the presence of another version of the dream, along with the importance of imagination in the story.

Key Words: dream, American Dream, escape, Lennie, George, Candy, fantasy, imagination.

Resumen:

Este trabajo trata de explorar la presencia e importancia del sueño americano en la novela de John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*. Poniendo especial énfasis en los aspectos de la esperanza y la libertad. En primer lugar, se analizará el sueño de los protagonistas como una versión del sueño americano, teniendo en cuenta la relación con el deseo de libertad, cambio y escape en sus vidas. También se tratará como el sueño crea e instiga la esperanza en ellos. Se hará referencia finalmente a una versión diferente del sueño en la historia para ver su importancia, así como la de la imaginación.

Palabras clave: sueño, sueño americano, escape, Lennie, George, fantasía, imaginación.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. The American Dream: context	1
3. 'A coupla acres'. Change, freedom, and the importance of money	2
4. The American Dream as hope and refuge	5
5. Other realizations of the American Dream and the role of imagination	9
6. Conclusion	11
7. Works Cited	12

1. Introduction

Of Mice and Men is undoubtedly one of John Steinbeck's best and most famous novels. This story has become a crucial piece of American literature, dealing with a variety of important themes, from which the American Dream stands out.

Therefore, in this dissertation I will analyse the American Dream as a crucial element in John Steinbeck's novel by looking into different aspects. The focus will stand on Lennie and George's version of the American Dream. Especially, its relevance throughout the story and the key elements of social mobility and economy for the Am. Dream. It will also be explored how their American Dream instils hope and becomes a refuge for the characters in the novel, which is crucial for the development of the story. Then, another version of the Am. Dream, Curley's wife's, will be considered, showing how although different, all realizations have the same effects on the characters. Finally, the presence of imagination in the story will be discussed along with its importance to represent their dreams, bringing all elements together. For this, I will make use of several secondary sources regarding John Steinbeck's work. But before, it would be important to establish a short introduction to the American Dream and context to Steinbeck's novel.

2. The American Dream: Context

The American Dream could be broadly defined as "the great national suggestion that anyone, with hard work according to the rules, has a reasonable prospect of succeeding in life" (Schudson 566). The novel, set in a Great Depression Salinas Valley, presents characters whose life-conditions are far from being ideal, in which dreaming becomes a very much needed resource. These migrant workers and ranch hands live in

rather precarious or unfavourable circumstances. Their dreams of future become important, as they seem to crave the refuge that only imagination can provide them. Thus, it appears inevitable that these people's dreams became, in many cases, some version or other of the American Dream. It is understandable how migrant workers living and travelling in very poor conditions, would take into this fantasy, becoming a rather indivisible subject.

3. 'A coupla acres'. Change, freedom, and the importance of money

Lennie and George's 'a coupla acres' dream is this story's very clear representation of the American Dream. "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" (Steinbeck 14). These two characters have a seemingly very simple dream of owning a little piece of land and being able to live by themselves, sustained through their farm: "off the fatta the lan" (14). While it may seem like their kind of American Dream is rather attainable, in depth, it can be more complex than that.

For this, it is crucial to mention George and Lennie's social and economic situation. These protagonists are two poor laborers with no social position, belongings, or place to call home. They are going from job to job in a very difficult economic landscape, that of a Great Depression time. To this precarious situation it is added how Lennie, mentally slower, sets their situation back even more. "You jus' stand there and don't say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job" (Steinbeck 6). Being already so difficult to find a job in socially and economically hostile environment, Lennie causes certain problems that force them to go and find new places to work in. They desperately need these temporary jobs to survive. In the words of William

Goldhurst: “[it is] the case history of two simple mortals who try to escape homelessness [and] economic futility” (129). It seems like their longing for ‘a couple acres’ really lands on their desire to escape their precarious situation. They long for a change in their life’s expectancies and, more importantly, they long for freedom to stop depending on the uncertainty of their jobs as ranch hands and the restrictions and conditions of the landowners. “Guys like us, that work on ranches, [...] ain’t got nothing to look ahead to. [...] with us it ain’t like that. We got a future” (Steinbeck 13-14). Even George himself here recognizes their lack of expectations, and, at the same time, he distances from that because they have their American Dream, their future land means a place in which they will be free and live happily and independently. It is thanks to their dream, their farm, that in some future they expect be out of their current situation. Richard E. Hart presents this idea very clearly: “the dream is largely about escape from an economic prison and [...] extreme poverty that restricts human freedom and opportunity” (35). Again, it can be seen how their American Dream is one of freedom and independence, one of escape from abusive and unstable life conditions. In the end, the American Dream is very much about that, about finding your independence and freedom through material success. The farm, the acres, and the rabbits are repeated throughout the story to symbolize the importance of the dream, reminding George and Lennie what they very much desire. In addition, the ideal situation of the dream holds such power and appeal, that the effect it has on the protagonists, can be also seen in some other characters in the story, as it will be later seen with Candy and Crooks.

The dream includes escape from a precarious economic situation and the opportunity to “live of the fatta the lan” (Steinbeck 14), but this is rather ironic. The only thing that they really need to achieve their dream is money. However, this is the only thing Lennie and George lack, no matter the hard work, they cannot reach their dream

because of their lack of means. It appears that maybe hard work would not suffice, as it is the only thing these companions do, and they still don't have it. "George and Lennie are naively and genuinely American in conception, and they pursue a vision of the American Dream that is as sweet as it is unattainable" (Doyle 80). This hints the importance of money and possessions for the realization of the American Dream, while suggesting, at the same time, its difficulty of realization for someone in a position like theirs. Therefore, the dream that these characters hold so dear, ironically, can only be attained by the same economic prosperity they lack and desire, making it rather unrealistic and unachievable.

Therefore, probably, even the characters themselves do not fully believe in the reality of their dream, although they do not vocalize it. They repeat their fantasy at different times but seem to take no action in its direction. However, this suddenly changes when Candy's intervention comes into play. The only moment in which the 'coupla acres' looks like a tangible possibility is when they share their aspirations with Candy. "S'pose I went in with you guys. Tha's three hundred an' fifty bucks I'd put in. I ain't much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some" (Steinbeck 59). This man offers his savings to their project under the condition that he can be part of it, and after a moment, the protagonists decide to accept. In part because the introduction of Candy to the dream brings the necessary money into the equation, changing everything, and they know this: "They fell into a silence. They looked at one another, amazed. This thing they had never really believed in was coining true." (Steinbeck 60). The two companions realize how close to fruition the dream is now and they feel extremely excited. The narrator voices their sudden happiness and enthusiasm, thus revealing how they did not really believe it attainable, until now. With Candy's money the dream seems for the first time closer than ever. Now they have the idea, the will and more importantly,

the money necessary to make it happen. Nevertheless, most of the time, that did not matter very much for them. All throughout the story the ‘coupla acres’ is what feeds their hopes no matter what. The unspoken impossibility of the dream does not impede it from cheering the characters at any given time, as they must attach to something to keep going.

4. The American Dream as hope and refuge

The difficult realization of the American Dream is not as important in the story as the fact that it maintains and nourishes their hope and their will to keep going. As mentioned before, the ‘coupla acres’ means hope of change, freedom, and economic betterment. All things that a person in their same situation would clearly desire and dream about. It is for this reason that anytime Lennie and George face a difficult situation they recur to their fantasy to get the spirits up again. As mentioned by Goldhurst “their farm, which Steinbeck emphasizes repeatedly is a place of abundance and a refuge” (125). The farm will serve as a physical refuge for them in the future, but more importantly, it serves as a mental and emotional one for them now.

Every time things get uncomfortable for them, they recur to the dream as a way of escape, but mainly to maintain their hope in something that can keep them going. The hope they get from the dream can be seen all along the development of the story, but even more so at the start. As explained by Vicent Benlloch: “From the first interactions between the two men that Steinbeck shows us to the last words that Lennie hears, they are all in service to the same fantasy” (89). When their dream is first presented, it is something new for the reader but not for the characters who appear to know it by heart and have repeated it many times before. They do it with great passion, especially Lennie who loves to hear about it, as he is much more naïve than George and gets completely

carried away by the fantasy. “They sat by the fire and filled their mouths with beans and chewed mightily [...] When we get the coupla acres I can let you tend the rabbits all right [...] Lennie choked with pride” (Steinbeck 15). The aforementioned can be clearly noticed in this visual moment here that might even be considered metaphorical. In the first pages, at the same time Lennie and George are telling again the story of their dream, they are on the process of having dinner. It seems that while they are physically feeding themselves, their version of the American Dream is also nourishing their hearts and their hopes. This soothes, at least for a moment, all other worries that they may have had during the day. It serves to remind them that they must keep going because of what is ahead, what they can achieve. It is hope for their journey as well as refuge and escape for when things get too difficult.

Additionally, the events developing at the end of the story demonstrate this further. The thing that brings the most happiness and nourishes Lennie’s expectations the most is the possibility of attending the rabbits and animals on the farm by himself. Again, it can be signalled how for Lennie too, the dream is about freedom and hope, in this case he hopes and longs to have the freedom of owning and taking care of his own animals, as he is a much simpler being. That is why, when he accidentally kills Curley’s wife, he knows that he has done much wrong and has lost what is dearer to him. In this moment imagination and fantasy also make an important appearance: “from out of Lennie’s head there came a gigantic rabbit” (Steinbeck 101). Lennie hallucinates his aunt and then a rabbit talking to him in Lennie’s voice that vocalizes his biggest fears. ““The hell you wouldn’,” said the rabbit. [...] “If you think George gonna let you tend rabbits, you’re even crazier’n usual” (Steinbeck 102). The rabbit expressed Lennie’s fears of the dream coming to an end. Thus, it marks the end of his hope and his illusions and moments later, his life too. This shows how important the dream is in their lives, that even when he had

done something awful and was about to die, the only thing he was worried about was about losing the dream, the rabbits.

The point of the story in which various characters find themselves in their highest peak of hope is, once again, thanks to Lennie and George's 'coupla acres'. The protagonists include into their dream first Candy and then indirectly, Crooks. Candy's case is two folded. First, as analysed before, his inclusion brings the very necessary money into the equation. Secondly, and probably more importantly, his admittance brings all of them hope, the hope that now it can become true, and they can finally be free. With Candy's involvement, their hopes and spirits become renewed. The characters see their possibility of a future so much clearer now. So much that they even start making more detailed plans about it. As explained by John L. Marsden: "when the possibility of realizing their hopes seems closer, the description of "a coupla acres" and the comforts they will offer becomes much more detailed" (294). They now feel secure enough to add details to their dream because they are excited and believe that they soon will be able to accomplish it. Also, particularly for Candy, it means the expectation of a second opportunity, a way out of the farm in which he is a cripple now, and fears being put down just like his dog was. "I won't have no place to go, an' I can't get no job" (Steinbeck 60). His lack of expectations ends with the 'coupla acres' plan.

For all of them, again, it becomes an aspiration of freedom and the possibility of a future. In words of Steinbeck: "They all sat still, all bemused by the beauty of the thing, each mind was popped into the future when this lovely thing should come about" (60). Not only do they dream of having their own farm, but they fantasize about having the freedom to do whatever they want with their time, which is also part of their American Dream: "George said wonderingly, "S'pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball game, or any damn thing. [...] We'd just go to her [...] We wouldn't ask nobody

if we could”” (Steinbeck 61). In this moment, the three characters agreed, as Lennie and George had done before, to keep the possibility of the farm a secret, intending to keep this possibility of a future for themselves.

However, this promise is soon broken one more time by Lennie, who accidentally and naively shares it with Crooks almost at the end of the story. Inevitably, their ‘promise’ is “the American Dream of freedom, self-sufficiency, camaraderie” (Heavilin 145) and that camaraderie is achieved by the union of the different characters to it. Crooks is an alienated and pessimistic African American man who is mistreated at the ranch because of his race and position, and he also rejects Lennie when he first comes into his bunk. Besides, once Crooks hears the story he is not as optimistic and hopeful as Candy was: “You guys is just kiddin’ yourself [...] I seen too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under they hand” (Steinbeck 75). He repeats this idea several times during his conversation with Lennie. Crooks’ intervention is the only time in which the dream is not presented as something hopeful, reachable, or unique. In his pessimism he points out that it is not the first time he has heard workers like them with a plan like that that never really happens. He is the only one that openly voices the difficulty, or even impossibility, of their American Dream, their only antagonist. However, “even the cynical Crooks, [...] is caught up” (Marsden 295). The hope that a plan like this can provide in such a life condition is very powerful, so much that Crooks finally offers himself up to be part of the dream. For him, it means a glimpse of hope, a way of having a future and expectations, just like the others, something that he had never even dreamt of. And more importantly for him, it is a way out of alienation. In the ranch, Crooks is always lonely and isolated because of his race, he is left aside in his bunk, and he craves company. “S’pose you couldn’t go into the bunkhouse and play rummy ‘cause you was black [...] a guy goes nuts in he ain’t got nobody” (Steinbeck 72). The arrival of the naïve Lennie with his story

and later Candy validating it, makes “Crooks offer himself as another candidate for the fellowship of soul-brothers and dreamers” (Goldhurst 130). He volunteers, and, for a moment, he becomes part of something, as he had never been before, which inevitably brings him hope too: “You say you got the money [...] He hesitated. “... If you ... guys would want a hand to work for nothing—just his keep, why I’d come an’ lend a hand. I ain’t so crippled I can’t work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to.” (Steinbeck 76). Crooks is not ‘officially accepted’ by the protagonists as Candy was, but after hearing the plan he decides to include himself. He sees the possibility, the opportunity, and their enthusiasm, and believes it possible.

5. Other realizations of the American Dream and the element of imagination

It has been shown how George and Lennie’s version of the American Dream is the one that carries more importance in the story. However, there are some other character’s dreams present that are worth mentioning too. Particularly Curley’s wife longing of becoming a movie star.

Curley’s wife dream is one of success and fame, elements very closely related to the American Dream, hers could be considered another version in the story. Like the other characters, she recurs to it for hope and evasion from her difficult reality. She fantasizes about becoming a movie star. “Coulda been in the movies, an’ had nice clothes [...] An’ I coulda sat in them big hotels, an’ had pitchers took of me. [...] Because this guy says I was a natural” (Steinbeck 89). This dream of fame and fortune is something she always had in mind to escape her lack of expectations, just as Lennie and George did with their farm. For her, it meant independence too, first from her relationship with her mother and later from his abusive husband, Curley. Although it is quite clear how little possibility her

dream had of happening before, now at the farm it is completely gone. However, she keeps fantasizing about it and repeating it whenever she has the chance, because this is the dream that keeps her going. It seems to be what she holds on to not think about the situation she is in, which is one of abuse and alienation. It seems like attaching to this fantasy and telling it to people is the only thing that keeps the young girl going in such a hostile environment.

Finally, it should be mentioned how both dreams share one very important feature, the role of imagination. Imagination is what fuels them because none of them really come to fruition. They fantasize once and again with the ‘what ifs’ of their lives if they weren’t in the precarious situation that they are in. It is through imagination that they distract, evade, and hope for the many things that they lack in their lives that they cannot achieve. The dreams that they fantasize about and that have been analysed before are of course, part of this. The presence of imagination is also very strong at the end of the story when Lennie hallucinates about different elements before his death. This is all part of the characters’ minds; nothing really does happen. Still, that does not matter because the characters have them present, continuously, and very vividly. It is by imagining and fantasizing that they add or subtract different details and even people, like Candy and Crooks to the dream. Plus, as the dreams are part of their imagination they can be adjusted and endure whichever the situation they need. They have created these fantasies which most probably will never happen, but they decide to act as they will do, being the only strain of hope left for them to hold on to. Therefore, imagination is important because it is how the dreams sustain themselves and where they live in, what fuels something that means everything for these people in the Salinas Valley.

6. Conclusion

With this dissertation I aimed to explore and clarify the significance of the American Dream for the characters and story of *Of Mice and Men*. Specially, as it has been demonstrated, how the versions of the American Dream in this story will be determined by matters of social betterment and tied to economic and material success. Also, how these characters from precarious and poor backgrounds attach to their own versions of the American Dream, even if they know it will probably never be possible, they remain alive in their imaginations. The characters fantasize about the what ifs of their futures to evade from the disenchantment in their lives. This way, through the American Dream and the motor of imagination they acquire hope and the very much needed will to keep going. Thus, by finally acknowledging the influence and different attributes of the American Dream in the story, its approach and understanding on the part of the reader would probably gain a different and maybe richer perspective.

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