
Intellectual Disability in American Literature with Reference To John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract

*Disability is a recurring theme in literature across all periods and genres. It refers to physical or mental conditions that limit a person's movements, senses, or activities. The discourse surrounding disability has existed in culture and literature for a long time, predating the 1990s. This paper will examine Intellectual Disability in American Literature, with reference to *Of Mice and Men*, to provide valuable context for understanding the characters' actions and their consequences for their lives. It will explore societal perceptions and treatment of individuals with disabilities, shedding light on their challenges and the need for empathy and understanding. It will also examine the historical and cultural factors that shaped the portrayal of disability in American literature at the time *Of Mice and Men* was written, providing valuable context for understanding the novel's attitudes and representations of disability. Further, the paper will analyse the impact of disability on the characters' identities and relationships in *Of Mice and Men*, shedding light on how intellectual disability shapes their experiences and worldview.*

Keywords: disability, American literature, stereotypes, historical, migrants, identities.

Disability is a constant presence in literature across all periods and genres. It refers to physical or mental conditions that limit a person's movements, senses, or activities. Disability as a discourse existed in culture and literature long before the 1990s and is often considered the point of entry into this field. Disability in the eighteenth century was described as any incapacity in a person or thing. Samuel Johnson defines the noun 'disability' as the want of power to do anything, weakness, impotence, and the verb 'to disable' as 'to deprive of natural force,' to 'weaken' and to 'crush.' 'Deformity' was frequently used and was the dominant heterogeneous category for describing visible congenital and acquired impairments; 'disability' was not commonly used during that period. (Essaka Joshua)

The use of the term "disability" gained traction as part of the global disability rights movement, which sought to challenge stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities in the twentieth century. To study the spectrum of cognitive disability, one must consider intelligence from different disciplines. Psychologists often view intelligence as "the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience," as quoted in 'Defining intelligence: Bridging the gap between human and artificial perspectives' (Gilles E). Biological intelligence refers to a mental ability determined by forebrain functioning. It typically seeks to understand intelligence by directly

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studying the brain and its functioning rather than by studying primarily products or processes of behaviour (Robert J. Sternberg). Another form is psychometric intelligence, a term that refers to the measurement of an individual's cognitive abilities and mental capacity through standardised tests, designed to assess various aspects of intelligence, including problem-solving skills, memory, reasoning, and verbal abilities. In contemporary contexts, these methods are used to determine the spectrum of intelligence.

The primary objective of this paper is to briefly explore the representation of the intellectually disabled in American literature of the 1930s, especially in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, through the character of Lennie Small. This paper will contextualise some of the historical, political policies and societal perceptions of disability. By reading the stigma, discrimination and injustices reflected in the novel, the paper aims to shed light on the deep-seated prejudices that shaped the lived experiences of disabled characters and their representation in literature.

What are the dynamics of Lennie Small and George's relationship (the disabled and the non-disabled)? Are George's identity and experiences, particularly as the protector and mentor, shaped by this relationship? To what extent? Ultimately, the paper seeks to contribute to the discourse in disability studies and to advocate for empathy and a better understanding of disabled subjects.

This paper uses a qualitative methodology to examine the representation of intellectual disability in American literature, focusing on John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* and William Faulkner's novel "The Sound and the Fury", and drawing on academic papers, historical documents, and a literature review. A brief look at the historical context will enrich the analysis of Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie's character. The textual analysis of the primary text, *Of Mice and Men*, aims to provide a deeper understanding of intellectual disability as represented in American literature.

It is necessary to examine historical context and evolving terminology to gain a clear grasp of how disability is understood. Throughout history, those who are not at the same intellectual level or physically strong as those around them have been treated differently and cruelly. This trend is seen in animals, where the runt in a litter gets killed, eaten, or left behind. In the 1930s in America, people with mental disabilities were seen as less capable than people without disabilities, viewed as objects of pity and requiring charity. People with disabilities and members of minority groups were subjected to discrimination and mistreatment. They often faced discrimination, were subject to abuse, had limited access to education, were socially stigmatised, and were targeted by forced sterilisation policies. Abnormal behaviour and low economic productivity levels were considered a societal burden, and people were

placed in institutions. However, the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 improved the lives of many disabled individuals slightly.

During the era when institutions were considered the primary treatment for people with developmental disabilities, the reality was far from compassionate. The institutions were dehumanising places; residents faced medical abuse, including forced medical experiments done on residents without their consent; forced sterilisation was used to prevent disabled people from having children; some doctors even suggested euthanasia for people with intellectual disabilities, the "feeble-minded," and discriminatory laws also prevented visibly disabled people from going outside.

The legal and medical frameworks supporting these abuses were further reinforced by thriving movements, such as Eugenics, which viewed disability through a lens of genetic purity. The Eugenics movement, though it gained popularity after Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, has its roots in the Age of Enlightenment and industrialisation. "In 1914, Harry Laughlin published a Model Eugenical Sterilisation Law that proposed authorising the sterilisation of the 'socially inadequate' - people supported in institutions or 'maintained wholly or in part by public expense.' The law encompassed the 'feeble-minded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf; deformed; and dependent' - including 'orphans, ne'er-do-wells, tramps, the homeless and paupers.'" When the Model Law was published in 1914, twelve states had enacted sterilisation laws." - (Lombardo, Paul. Eugenics in the USA. 1930s.)

These sterilisation laws and societal attitudes had direct negative consequences for the treatment or ignoring of individuals with disabilities, especially in institutions meant to house and treat them. The movements and models created by mainstream 'able-bodied' individuals created a space for a critical reading of the representation of disabled characters in literature. A one-sided narrative was created that sheds light on the need to discuss intellectual disability and offers insight into the representation of characters like Lennie in Steinbeck's *'Of Mice and Men'* and the portrayal of intellectual disability in literature. "By 1931, 30 states had eugenic laws, laws that would target and systematically discriminate against some of the most vulnerable members of society. It was not until the 1940s that eugenics came under close scrutiny for its lack of scientific basis and its disproportionate effects on the poorest and most disenfranchised citizens." (Susan P)

Disability became an important subject in American literature. In some of his most popular works, John Ernst Steinbeck wrote about the condition. John Ernst Steinbeck (1902-1968), recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, from Salinas, California, U.S., was an

American novelist. Before his books succeeded, he spent considerable time supporting himself as a manual labourer. Steinbeck's experiences from Monterey County, California, were used as the backdrop for his most well-known novels. His keen observations of the sociopolitical events and the daily lives of local people, their gestures, dialects and scandals were recorded and used later. During his nearly two years as an itinerant farm worker in California, Steinbeck gathered much of the material he would later utilise in his work. His personal experiences lent authenticity to his depictions of the workers' lives in his stories, especially in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and "Grapes of Wrath" (1939). (Britannica.com)

Another popular work, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which was voted one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, was also published around the same time as *Of Mice and Men*. The novel features characters with mental and physical challenges in central roles. Divided into four sections, it is narrated by different family members: Quentin, Dilsey, and Benjy. The first section is told from Benjy's perspective. Benjy, a 33-year-old "idiot" with the mind of a small child, depicts his struggles with his intellectual disability and his family interactions. His mistreatment due to his mental impairment is a central focus of the novel. His perspectives embody a purely sensory view of the world, free from interpretation or external interaction. His chapter offers brief glimpses of actions and events, lacking any revelatory force or conscious narration. "Repeatedly, Benjy states that Caddy smelled like trees, indicating a consistent association between Caddy and the scent of trees. Yet he never explicitly connects this smell to thoughts of Caddy. Instead, he simply claims that Caddy smelled like trees. As a result, his lack of comprehension prevents readers from determining how his perceptions influence his thoughts or memories. Thus, his mind functions like that of a child, and his disabled consciousness keeps him eternally in the state of a boy." (Jessica Gicking P5) William Faulkner draws upon the theories of William James and Sigmund Freud regarding consciousness to create a disabled male character. Faulkner develops characters to both exaggerate the eternal boy and discuss the social and psychological problems that arose from the industrialisation of the American South. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949, and two of his subsequent novels, "A Fable" and "The Reivers", published posthumously in 1962, both won the Pulitzer Prize.

The novella *Of Mice and Men* is a tragic story about the complex bond between two migrant labourers, George and Lennie Small. When Steinbeck was interviewed by the *New York Times* shortly after the premiere of the Broadway play based on his novel, he said Lennie was a real person (Moulton). Lennie was based on a real insane person in an asylum in California. "I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn't stop him until it was too late." (Emily

Temple). The setting for *Of Mice and Men* was also fashioned after the Spreckles Sugar Company ranches in the California Salinas Valley, where Steinbeck worked during his stints at Stanford University.

In *Of Mice and Men*, instead of a man, the victim of the intellectually disabled man (Lennie) was a woman. As the story unfolds, readers are drawn deeper into the desperate mind of Lennie Small. When Lennie is falsely accused of rape, George has to take Lennie and flee Weed. Like the disabled person Steinbeck mentioned in his interview, Lennie too cannot process the injustice done to him. His desperation stems from his inability to understand nuanced human relationships and the limited understanding non-disabled people have of the disabled. Themes of friendship and companionship permeate the novel. Yet George and Lennie's friendship contrasts with that of other characters in the novel, such as Curley's wife and Crooks. This complex interplay of relationships points readers to confront the biases and recognise humanity in all.

The first man (George) was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man (Lennie), shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely. (Steinbeck 2)

With its animalistic characteristics, Lennie's portrayal reflects the preexisting moulds that limit his character's exploration. His loosely hanging hands further reinforce this animalistic image. Crooks, another ranch hand with a permanent disfigurement, also embodies the stigmas associated with underlying signs of an intellectual disability, highlighting the need to break free from these dehumanising stereotypes.

Beyond the apparent contrast between George, the intellectually able, and Lennie, the intellectually disabled, there is Crooks, an intellectually able man who is, however, a disabled individual. By introducing this character, Steinbeck adds another category for analysis; even among the marginalised, Lennie's cognitive disability places him at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Crooks is depicted as a clever and self-reliant individual yet physically weakened by his disability.

In the novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy was also likened to a trained bear.

Luster entered, followed by a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead looking and hairless; dropsical too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear... his eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his mouth hung open, drooling a little. (Faulkner 274)

There are several other portrayals in *Of Mice and Men* that align with the prevalent biases about disability at the time. After drinking water from the river, George "replaced his hat, pushed himself back..., drew up his knees and embraced them." Lennie imitates George's actions. Then, at the range, Lennie again copies George as he follows him; "George lifted his tick and looked underneath it.... Immediately Lennie got up and did the same with his bed" (Steinbeck 21). Lennie is not shown as having his own motivation in these moments, which reinforce the stereotypes about intellectual disabilities, depicting him as childlike and cute, but "this infantilisation contrasts with his size and his violent actions, embodying common literary tropes of the big oaf and the kind simpleton." (Sklar 148) George, compared to Lennie, is the representation of normalcy, as Lennie's description fits "stereotypes that are demeaning, dehumanising, and denigrating" (Chivers 4)

Lennie petting a dead mouse "Uh-uh. Jus' a dead mouse, George. I didn't kill it. ...I found it dead." (Steinbeck 6); later, he steals a puppy to pet it (Steinbeck 47) and explains how he "likes to pet nice things" (Steinbeck 95) all point to having an ulterior motive. Although Lennie's desire for soft things and wanting to touch and feel are childlike, others perceive this tendency as having ulterior intentions. We are told the reason they flee Weed is that Lennie "wants to touch ever'thing he likes... So he reaches out to feel this red dress an' the girl lets out a squawk...that girl rabbits an' tells the law she been raped... he just scared her" (Steinbeck 46). The action of petting (touching) is associated with negativity and is stigmatised in Western views. At the same time, seeing and hearing are considered intellectual and superior. This further stigmatises disabled bodies as non-normative.

The animalistic qualities associate Lennie with his unskilled labour on the farm, and the selling point George gives him is, "He can do anything you tell him... I ain't saying he's bright. He ain't... but he's sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull....But I say he's a God damn good worker. He can put up a four-hundred-pound bale" (Steinbeck 24). In this conversation, though George tried to speak in favour of Lennie's strength as an asset, it also revealed that having unmitigated strength for someone with an intellectual disability is dangerous. "Sure he's jes like a kid. There ain't no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he's strong" (Steinbeck 48). But there is a huge difference between physical capability and vulnerability in the context of Lennie. Such strength, coupled with his mind's limitations, becomes dangerous for people near him. Comparison to a child emphasises innocence, but when naivety is paired with extraordinary physical strength, it could lead to unintended harm. Steinbeck used this allusion to underscore the tragic consequences when society fails to understand people with intellectual disability spectrum.

Our understanding of the world around us is shaped by our emotional and cognitive abilities. In the case of Lennie, his intellectual disability not only hinders his understanding of the world, but also creates difficulties in his relationship with George. Lennie's dependence on George and his inability to fully comprehend the consequences of his actions influence the dynamics of their relationship, as George assumes the roles of friend, mentor, protector, and caregiver. This situation is further complicated by societal attitudes towards disability, which often leave George feeling burdened and Lennie feeling misunderstood.

Of Mice and Men is central to American literature, yet it garnered little sustained discourse from disability-studies scholars of the time. Jay Dolmage invokes the novella as an example of the “Kill-or-Cure” myth. (Disability Rhetoric 34). This myth often made disability look like a burden that needs a permanent solution- a remedy or a demise. While critiques from disability studies highlight the novella's reliance on stereotypes, they underestimate the extent to which the pathology of idiocy inspired Steinbeck's formal innovation. Steinbeck further complicates this binary by introducing characters like Lennie whose disability is integral to humanity. Ralph Thompson of ‘The New York Times’ found Steinbeck's interest in idiocy and its derivatives a nuisance. In his review of *The Long Valley* (1938), he portrays Johnny Bear, the title character of Steinbeck's lesser-known idiot narrative, as “dramatic, but hardly scrupulous”: “I for one pray that Mr. Steinbeck will avoid cretins, fools, imbeciles, boobies, idiots, dolts, and particular boneheads in the future. He does better with people who are normal or who can pass for such in a sizeable crowd” (Steinbeck 29). In response, Steinbeck quipped, “Mr. Thompson sets rather a task. How can I? There aren't any more in my books than in the scene around me” (Chaloupka E).

Steinbeck also draws his characters on the core trait of cognitive disability, the “pathology of idiocy,” which is the tendency to repeat. This can be seen in Lennie repeating George at the beginning of the novel and following him around, repeating him. At the end of the story, the readers are shown a reversal. George repeats what Lennie said.

"We'll have a cow," said George. "An' we'll have maybe a pig an'

chickens . . . an' down the flat we'll have a . . . little piece alfalfa-

"For the rabbits," Lennie shouted. / "For the rabbits," George repeated.

"And I get to tend the rabbits." / "An' you get to tend the rabbits."

Lennie giggled with happiness. "An' live on the fatta the lan'." (Steinbeck 116)

This reversal shows the bond between the two characters. It symbolises a shift in the friendship and subtly implies a deep connection between the disabled and the able, mirroring each other through acceptance.

Another angle of representation of deviancy is Lennie and Curley's wife; Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife by breaking her neck and then "lifted her arm and let it drop.... And then he whispered in fright, 'I done a bad thing. I done another bad thing'" (Steinbeck 100). Lennie has to be killed off for the betterment of the able society. The same goes for Curley's wife too, who has constantly been projected as someone who has already transgressed both her marital boundaries and the accepted sexual norms of the society and has to be killed.

"Steinbeck embellished, emphasised, and added traits to his memory of a slow-witted ranch hand he had met in real life. The worker had a much more rational motive for his crime than Lennie: he killed his boss for firing his friend" (Chaloupka 403). Lennie, by contrast, kills a woman without intention, his characterisation drawing on cultural fears of the volatile, dangerous, and sexually aggressive idiot. Lennie and his real-life inspiration meet different ends as well. The latter is sent to an asylum, while the former is killed (Chivers 66).

On closer reading of Lennie's character, the reader can discern that he suffers from an intellectual disability that significantly impacts his life. Yet, he is capable of having a dream for the future.

"Lennie said softly, 'We could live offa the fatta the lan'.' ... 'Tell about the house, George,' Lennie begged... 'An' rabbits,' Lennie said eagerly. 'An' I'd take care of 'em. Tell how I'd do that, George.' ... 'They'd nibble an' they'd nibble,' said Lennie, 'the way they do. I seen 'em.' (Steinbeck 64)

The 1930s in California were a period of great turmoil and transition. As early as when Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men*, influenced heavily by the idiocy stereotype, he realised that the mentally disabled could function, too, given the opportunity and help. To better understand the implications and long-term beliefs, one needs to go further back to the 1940s.

Willowbrook opened in 1947 as an institution for mentally disabled children and was designed to house up to 1000 students by 1965; however, it was home to over 6000 disabled children. In the 1970s, a journalist named Geraldo Rivera gained access to the school with a video camera. He found out there was one attendant for perhaps 50 severely and profoundly 'retarded' children and "children lying on the floor naked and smeared with their own faeces." They were making a pitiful sound and mournful wailing. Since this report was issued, significant improvements have been made. (The Story That Revealed Willowbrook's Horrors)

By the twentieth century, the discourse on Eugenics had become increasingly interwoven with notions of disability and improved living standards for able-bodied individuals. California, where the setting of the novel takes place, became the third state in the United States to enact a sterilisation law. By 1921, California had accounted for 80% of sterilisations nationwide. (U.S. Eugenics)

When analysing further, *Of Mice and Men*, it is essential to recall that the California George and Lenny experienced was not yet the California we know today. Much like California's drastic change throughout the first half of the 20th century, the lives of Americans living with disabilities changed significantly during the latter half of the twentieth century. Many people throughout most of American history did not view people with developmental disabilities as human beings. It was considered acceptable to experiment on them because they were considered less than human. According to the Department of Education, early public education systems often overlooked students with disabilities. In the 1950s, small groups of parents advocating for the education of students with disabilities formed a national organisation called NARC. The first genuinely significant reform for disability education came from the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. In this act, there were many sections that banned discrimination against people with disabilities, like Section 504. Furthermore, medical advancements have contributed to creating awareness among society, making a positive shift towards disabled people.

In comparison to all the inhuman treatment meted out to the disabled in the 1930s, the depression era, Lennie is having a better deal because George is highly protective of him. George wants Lennie to have a chance in life. The question often asked of Lennie is whether he is unfit for society. One can ask a new question: what are the “social fitness” parameters in the novel, and how are they upheld? Social fitness seems to tie one's ability to contribute economically in *Of Mice and Men*. George's protective nature towards Lennie also suggests that individuals who deviate from societal expectations are marginalised.

The non-teleological approach, which Steinbeck called “Is Thinking,” lent a journalistic quality to his delivery of text. If we view Lennie as sympathetic, pitiable, comical, crude, innocent, or cruel, it is not because Steinbeck himself supplies any of these specific signifiers. George tells Lennie to keep quiet at the job interview because he is well aware of society's views and would allow Lennie to prove his abilities and society wrong through his work ethic. Despite the best efforts of an intellectually disabled man and 'his caretaker,' to make it work in life, Steinbeck reminds the reader of the harsh reality for the disabled specific to his time.

Another central theme in *Of Mice and Men* is the manifestations of unbelonging and loneliness, and the quality of life among the disabled people, due to their inability to generate employability. During the Great Depression, job opportunities were limited, which was highlighted in the novel. Lennie's employment options are primarily confined to unskilled labour, and his value to the ranch where they seek work is based mainly on his physical strength rather than his intellectual capabilities. The characters' disabilities influence their relationships with the non-disabled characters. Lennie's intellectual disability shapes his

relationship with George. His vulnerability, due to his intellectual disability, impacts his sense of belonging and self-worth. This is evidenced by his constant longing to stay with George. The deeper emotional struggles of the other characters in the novella were explored.

Philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and beyond, have acknowledged rationality as distinguishing humans from animals. This has led to questions about the humanity of intellectually disabled individuals and whether they are considered human at all. Societal attitudes towards disabilities have significantly improved in the latter part of the 20th century, where laws and policies have been implemented to protect the rights of disabled people, and there is a growing emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility across various aspects of life, including education, employment, and public spaces. All in all, through *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck has provided a lens through which the different kinds of disability could be explored and the complexities of human relationships understood.

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