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Disability, Difference, and the Politics of Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reading of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract

Of Mice and Men (1937) is a popular story about friendship and loneliness, economic insecurity and the failure of the American dream, in the time of the Depression. In this regard, however, it is a provocation to think of the social systems that make sense of bodily and cognitive differences. The study employs a Disability Studies framework to examine Lennie Small's intellectual disability in relation to impairment, dependency, labour, social exclusion, and the politics of normalcy. Based on Lennard J. Davis's theory of normalcy, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting, Tobin Siebers's understanding of embodiment, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and Eva Feder Kittay's ethics of dependency, as well as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis, the study argues that Lennie's vulnerability results from the interplay of cognitive difference and an environment that is structured by economic productivity, masculine independence, and behavioral conformity. The analysis also embraces the physical handicap of Candy, the difference of Crooks' body and the racial undercurrent of the society, as well as the gendered isolation of Curley's wife. The characters of George and Lennie, the farm, and alternatives to the farm, as sources of belonging, are all considered, as are the moral issues that come up about what happens to Lennie. Lastly, the author suggests that Steinbeck represents a society which is intolerant of difference and further maintains that representational norms of dependency, animality and self-elimination are associated with disability that are reinforced by Steinbeck.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Normalcy, Ableism, Intellectual disability, Stigma, Dependency, Embodiment, Social exclusion

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1. Introduction

The novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck holds a special place in American literature because it describes the nature of friendship, loneliness, economic distress and the precarious position of migrant workers in America during the Great Depression. The novella is about two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, who work side by side looking for work and aspire to own a little farm and live off their own. Ultimately, their dreams are crushed by the environment in which they live, the changeable jobs they have, and the lack of opportunity for economically disadvantaged workers. The lost dream of America, the broken bonds of human friendship, and the ravages of American poverty are often the themes of traditional interpretations of *Of Mice and Men*. These concerns are always central, but a Disability Studies perspective also exposes another aspect of the story – the connection between bodily and cognitive difference and the social conditions which define who is able, valuable, independent, or worthy to belong? Lennie's lack of mental ability plays a crucial role in this investigation. He has very strong muscle power and is quite good at the repetitive tasks associated with manual work, but has problems with interpreting social cues, controlling his emotions and making decisions on his own. The distinctions make him vulnerable in a labour system that requires his bodily productivity and conformity of his behaviour and self-management. Contradiction is especially important because the ranch considers their workers with respect to their economic value. If Lennie's strength is a component of productivity, then it is valuable, but if he does not fit into the expectations, he becomes a threat. His employment thus exposes the limitations of a social system that values certain abilities while disregarding others.

The novella is also an expression of other types of bodily and social marginalization. His job is in jeopardy because of the loss of a hand, and old age, while Crooks's back is injured and racial segregation is a problem. Curley's wife is an outcast in a male-dominated working class society. Their characters are socially different, but they all share the experience of belonging, that is, as determined by their body, their age, race, gender and usefulness to the economy.

The study of these relationships can be done productively by looking at Disability Studies as a field that moves beyond the focus on impairment as an individual problem in order to focus critical attention on social configurations in which difference becomes disadvantage. This does not disregard the subject matter fact of Lennie's handicap. Rather, it asks what kinds of characteristics he might have and how his characteristics are interpreted, managed, stigmatized, and punished in a specific historical context.

The present article suggests that *Of Mice and Men* reveals a politics of normality that makes it possible to benefit from being accepted by society and to conform to the norms of rationality, independence, productivity and proper conduct. Lennie's tragedy is not only a cognitive one but also it is a situation where cognitive deficits combine with poverty, insecure work, lack of social supports and insufficient viable options other than being left out of society. Meanwhile, Steinbeck's representation is morally murky. Throughout the story, the narrative elicits sympathy for Lennie and shows how harsh his reality is, but also offers many animalistic characterizations of him, explains his reliance on George, and ends with his death. The challenge to social exclusion

in the novella must therefore be taken into account alongside the role that the novella plays in adherence to representational conventions that may reinforce disability stereotypes.

This article argues that *Of Mice and Men* is not merely a tragedy of individual difference but also a literary exploration of the social construction of normalcy and its consequences for those who fail to conform.

2. Historical and Socioeconomic Context

2.1 The Great Depression and the Vulnerability of Migrant Workers

Understanding the social environment of *Of Mice and Men* requires a knowledge of the historical context of the Great Depression. The novella was published in 1937, part of Steinbeck's larger efforts to examine the lives of marginalized workers in California, their struggles against poverty and dispossession, and their experiences as agricultural workers. The 1930s' economic crisis worsened unemployment, migration, and search for temporary employment. Agricultural labourers often found themselves working on a seasonal basis, and they had little protection from ill-health, injury, unemployment, or loss of physical abilities. George and Lennie live in just such a world. They work with short-term jobs, live in temporary quarters and have an uncertain future depending on the employer's willingness to hire them. Things are already dire before conflict begins when they encounter disability-related barriers. In this context, capacity for work becomes a principal measure of social worth. Workers should be strong, reliable, obedient and independent. People whose physical appearance or actions do not meet expectations are at greater risk. An unstable economic situation is thus compounded by Lennie's cognitive disorder. His physical strength is valued by employers, but his lack of communication skills and social judgment raises fears that he may lose his job. This is a similar issue in Candy's case. His old body, without his hand, makes it difficult for him to do heavy work, and he is afraid that someday he'll not be needed on the ranch anymore.

Thus, the novella effectively draws a close connection between the ability of the body and the survival of the economy. Disability is not simply a result of an impairment, but of a very particular definition of productive capacity which can be translated into a living.

2.2 Disability, Institutionalization, and Eugenic Attitudes

It is important to also recognize the history of disability in *Of Mice and Men* in the context of early-twentieth-century American attitudes toward intellectual and/or physical difference. This time period was marked by a frequent use of medical, institutional and eugenic frameworks to interpret disability. The term "intellectual deficiency" was used to label people and they were often segregated, institutionalized, and limited in their choices and freedoms. Building a Better Race, by Wendy Kline, and Laboratory of Deficiency, by Natalie Lira, illustrate how eugenic ideology, institutional power and the control of people defined as socially or biologically deficient are interconnected. California held a special place in the American eugenics movement. The past of forced sterilization and institutionalisation is testimony to how intellectual disability could be linked to the idea of social threat or deficiency.

The historical background is pertinent to how George explains the difference in the thinking of Lennie during their job interview. George does not acknowledge Lennie's handicap in an obvious way; instead, he says that it is due to an accident he had when he was a child. The

explanation is a protection strategy. George seems to be aware that the way that the difference with the boss is interpreted determines how he will respond to Lennie. Clare Lawrence's interpretation of the novella focuses on the work's portrayal of Lennie and the historical perspective on people with intellectual challenges. While it would be inappropriate to say that each of the events in the story directly relate to the eugenic ideology, the historical correlation between cognitive difference and social unfitness helps explain the dangers of Lennie's situation. The novella is also earlier than the extensive disability-rights legislation of later in the twentieth century. It is a world of people with disabilities that live in a social environment where assistance is scarce and caring duties are largely the province of the individual. George, then, provides Lennie with most of his protection, supervision, and pragmatic help. Lack of institutional support is the tragic core of the novella.

3. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Disability Studies and the Social Construction of Difference

Disability Studies challenges exclusively medical interpretations of disability by examining how bodily and cognitive differences interact with social, cultural, economic, and institutional structures. Simi Linton has devised a new category of disability in Claiming Disability, a cultural and political one. Her work breaks away from the medicalization of disabled people and focuses on the social attitudes, social representation and institutional power. This is particularly true of Lennie's thought processes which are not self-sustaining without the environment. His struggles are particularly significant in the context of situations that involve quick social interpretation, autonomous negotiation and strong behavioural consistency. The novella therefore suggests a distinction between impairment and social context and factors which exacerbates the impact of impairment. There are some dangers to be faced around Lennie, and the expectations and reaction of other characters must be considered when explaining the hazards, but Lennie has genuine cognitive struggles.

3.2 Lennard J. Davis and the Politics of Normalcy

This study is based on the theory of Enforcing Normalcy propounded by Lennard J. Davis. Davis examines the history of normalcy and dissects the neutral and universal norm of the normal body/mind. Normality is more like a historical artefact that sets apart accepted characteristics and features from what are deemed deviant. Lennard J. Davis argues that "normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (22). His argument provides a theoretical basis for examining how the ranch's expectations concerning productivity, independence, and behaviour contribute to Lennie's marginalisation. In *Of Mice and Men*, the ranch tacitly enforces norms of normal behaviour. A good worker should recall instructions, communicate well, keep it together, know his or her place in society, and work productively. These expectations are not fulfilled in a uniform manner and emerge as a problem for Lennie. People are evaluated on their ability as well as on their behaviour and on their action in a manner recognized by the institutions.

3.3 Garland-Thomson and the Concept of Misfitting

There is another aspect of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting that is important. In "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept", she sees disability as a dynamic intersection between the body and material/social context. An individual may be a good fit for an

environment if its arrangements support specific capacities and needs but may be a poor fit if the arrangements do not support the individual's bodily or cognitive capacities or needs. In this way this framework can be used to account for Lennie's ambivalent state. His memory, judgment and social interactions are impaired, which can cause issues in environments that demand independent judgment and decision-making, but he can perform demanding agricultural tasks well. The difference indicates that disability is not just a lack of ability. Which capacities are recognized and which differences are disabling depends on the relationship that the individual has to a specific environment. Garland-Thomson explains the relational nature of disability by stating that "Misfit emphasizes context over essence, relation over isolation, mediation over origination" (593). This perspective suggests that Lennie's difficulties cannot be understood independently of the social environment in which his abilities are evaluated.

3.4 Stigma, Embodiment, and Dependency

In Stigma Erving Goffman provides a conceptual mechanism to comprehend how a socially discrediting attribute affects identity and interpersonal relations. George carefully manages information about Lennie because he knows that Lennie's cognitive differences may invite negative judgments from others. He speaks for Lennie and rationalizes his behaviour and attempts to ensure that situations are not created where his difference is evident. What these actions demonstrate is the social effects of stigma. Lennie's ability to work in the normal manner is connected with George's ability of controlling the perceptions of others. Siebers emphasises the material realities of embodiment, demonstrating that disability cannot be understood exclusively through social attitudes and institutional barriers. Siebers has pointed out the materiality of embodiment, and the significance of difference in physical and cognitive terms; but this debate was not limited to these issues. This point of view does not lead to a starkly simplistic portrayal, one in which society is blamed for all events. Cognitive limitations have real consequences, but their significance is also shaped by the social environment in which Lennie lives.

Other dimensions are provided by Eva Feder Kittay's writings on dependency. In Love's Labour and Learning from My Daughter, however, Kittay challenges the notion that independence constitutes the condition for human personhood. Her method is particularly suitable for the relationship between George and Lennie. Although Lennie depends heavily on George for guidance and protection, George also derives companionship, emotional support, and a sense of purpose from their relationship. The connection between the two makes it hard to differentiate the care provider from the recipient.

3.5 Narrative Prosthesis and the Representation of Disability

This is a textually oriented approach to the study of the representation of disability, called narrative prosthesis, which was developed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. In Narrative Prosthesis, they explore how literary narratives often rely on disability to create characterization, define conflict, provide symbolic significance, and to create narrative end. Mitchell and Snyder observe that "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization" (47). This observation is particularly relevant to Lennie, whose cognitive difference influences his characterisation, shapes the development of the narrative, and contributes to its tragic resolution. It impacts on George's protective mentality, their joblessness, and the continual instances of

Lennie's attraction to soft objects, of the tragic conclusion of the novella. However, the role of the narratives is not the same as representational autonomy. The others characters describe, explain, interpret and control Lennie. Sally Chivers, in her Disability Studies reading of Steinbeck, poses questions about the symbolic function of the disabled characters, while Clare Lawrence further develops her questions about the abiding ethical problems surrounding the character of Lennie. These views combined point to the need to not uncritically praise Steinbeck's depiction, nor condemn it. Lennie is made up of representational conventions, partly because of the conflicts between sympathy, story function, social exclusion and these representational conventions.

4. Disability, Difference, and the Politics of Normalcy

4.1 Lennie Small and the Construction of Abnormality

The novella provides the reader with the means to literally see Lennie's difference, prior to his having a sustained access to his point of view. George is physically small and quick, while Lennie is large and moves like an animal (Steinbeck, ch. 1). The contrast is immediate and it sets up an opposition between the body and the mind. Lennie's physical difference is seen and his cognitive difference is read from that. His movements, gestures and postures may be misinterpreted as those of animals or children, and give the impression that he is not a very independent adult. The importance of this imagery is that it affects the reader's perception of disability prior to Lennie's attempts to explain himself. Sally Chivers observes that the comparisons to animals are increasingly sinister as Steinbeck's narrative progresses. In rethinking the novella, Lawrence pinpoints the moral issues at stake with this representational approach. The animalization of descriptions can generate sympathy, enhance a sense of vulnerability, and can strip away disabled characters from a world of agency, which is deemed to be typical of the adult human world. This characterization is then an interesting paradox. Lennie is a physically strong, affectionate and emotionally dependent character, but he is also positioned against stereotypes of instinctive behaviour, dependence, and not-so-thoughtful logic. A Disability Studies interpretation does not require the denial of Lennie's cognitive difficulties. Rather, it is about the relationships between the setbacks and the assumptions on which he might be challenged: humanity, competence, and social value. This can be understood by Davis' theory of normalcy. Lennie's performance is judged by the adult male standards of independence, self control and rational communication. If he does not behave this way in all of these ways, he is considered unusual, abnormal, in the social world of the ranch. The story illustrates how this disability is manifested as a comparison to socially accepted standards, instead of showing impairment.

4.2 Disability, Labour, and Conditional Economic Inclusion

Labour and disability is a key issue in Lennie's role within the ranch economy. Even though Lennie has thought problems, he has incredibly strong muscles. Due to his capacity to do repetitive manual labour, he is an economic asset. During the conversation with the ranch boss, George emphasises Lennie's physical abilities by describing him as "Strong as a bull" (Steinbeck, ch. 2). The comparison demonstrates that Lennie's physical strength is valued within the ranch economy, even as his cognitive difficulties expose him to possible exclusion. However, his continued employment does not depend solely on his productivity. He needs to know and be able to follow instructions, be able to negotiate his authority and avoid any behaviours that could be perceived

as threatening or inappropriate. This is the problem that is illustrated in the employment interview. When he's about to talk to the employer, George tells Lennie to keep his mouth shut, so that the employer will not reject him because of his cognitive difference (Steinbeck, ch. 2). The point that George makes is about the significance of how one looks and how one is interpreted socially in terms of employability. Initially, one would think that Lennie's ability to do agricultural work is more than overpowered by concern about his ability to communicate and behave in the way socially accepted. In this instance, Goffman's notion of stigma is applicable as George tries to control a trait that could be devaluative to Lennie in the employer's mind. It also exemplifies the relational aspect of disability. Lennie's strength makes him well suited for some tasks, but when it comes to the hiring process, verbal and social competence are valued traits that he has a hard time exhibiting. This contradiction can be explained with Garland-Thomson's idea of misfitting. Lennie is able to fit an environment where physical work and repetition are the norm, and is unable to fit environments in which the norms involve rapid interpretation of unfamiliar social expectations. Lennie does not lack ability altogether. Instead, the institution acknowledges some skills and sees other differences as an indicator of overall lack of competence. This conditional inclusion of a status quo reveals the politics of the status quo in the ranch. Workers are met insofar as they can meet the economic and behavioural expectations of the labour system. Lennie is a man who seems to feel he is not as secure as he might think, with the value that is placed on his physical strength, not being enough to protect him from the consequences of his cognitive nonconformity.

4.3 Stigma, Surveillance, and the Management of Cognitive Difference

It is not only his own limitations that influence the experience of Lennie but also the need to consider how he might be interpreted by others. George tells him over and over again what and how to say and do, and when not to say or do. George acknowledges Lennie's cognitive limitations when he tells the ranch boss, "I ain't saying he's bright" (Steinbeck, ch. 2). However, he simultaneously emphasises Lennie's physical strength and capacity for work. This negotiation illustrates how George attempts to manage the employer's perception of Lennie and protect him from possible rejection. The following directions are intended to prevent Lennie from causing trouble, and also reveal the level of social control from others over his life. The relation of protection/restriction is of particular importance. George is aware that Lennie can be misunderstood, misused, or beaten. So he attempts to manage interactions so that they do not reach a level of danger. This protective role also helps to stop Lennie trying to present himself. The employment interview is a particularly good illustration. George recounts the tale in his mind of the difference that explains the difference, and also allows him to be the "main" voice of Lennie's identity. The concept of 'stigma' in Goffman's theory can help to shed light on this process. An individual's social participation can be defined by a socially discrediting characteristic so much so that the management of information becomes a part of an individual's social participation. Lennie is not simply admitted as a work tool which can be appraised. His difference needs to be hidden, explained or controlled. This is the pattern that is adhered to throughout the novella. George's setting is not really set up to understand cognitive difference. The ranch community has its assumptions about what it means to behave, what is at stake, what it means to be a man's job, what it does not. The difficulty that Lennie has with these conventions leaves him

open to punishment and misunderstanding. So the net result is a paradox. It is in George's supervision that Lennie is able to live in the social setting, but it is in the same way that his need for George's supervision also suggests that there is no more hospitable community. This novella exposes a process of concealment, explanation and surveillance of a normal social presence that is stamped by stigma.

4.4 George and Lennie: Care, Dependency, and Unequal Autonomy

George and Lennie's relationship is the heart of *Of Mice and Men*. They are distinctive for being able to share company with others, and for offering a sense of continuity in a volatile economic climate. George takes care of the negotiation of the job, the finances, the decisions, and protects Lennie from dangerous situations. This help is crucial for Lennie, and their relationship is not just independence vs dependence. Kittay's ethics of dependency disturbs the idea of care as an unusual relationship between a free and dependent person. Throughout their lives, human beings are dependent on others in various ways. It can be emotional, material, practical and social in nature. This is seen in George's relationship with Lennie. George has more decision-making power, but Lennie also provides him with companionship, a common cause, and the emotional significance of their dream. Repeated imagining of the farm gives them a feeling of belonging, which neither of the characters could maintain without the other. However, it is an imbalanced relationship. George has a lot of influence in Lennie's life and often decides for Lennie. His caring is thus a mixture of paternalism, love, and responsibility. This ambivalence is crucial to the novella's portrayal of disability. Recommendations for George's actions are made on the grounds of concern, and are also a reflection of the vulnerability of a person whose autonomy relies on another person's judgment. There is a lack of broader social support which exacerbates the issue. George will have to take on responsibilities which he may have had a family member, community, institution, or more flexible job to assist him with. Care is thus shown to be fragile in the novella when it becomes a purely personal responsibility. The dependency is not seen as being personally inadequate, but is an invitation to discuss social factors that enable care to be sustainable.

4.5 Candy, Crooks, and the Intersection of Disability with Other Forms of Exclusion

Lennie's disability occupies a central position in the novella, while Candy and Crooks embody disability as enveloped in other social hierarchies. Candy's missing hand and growing age render him susceptible in a labour system that is based on physical productivity. He has a fear of being "useless economically" which reveals how fragile the workers whose bodies are no longer wanted for work are. The realities of disability have a strong link to ageing. Candy's state is evidence for spatial variation in human capacity and for economic systems to legitimize humans for changes in their capacity. This is accentuated by the occurrence of Candy's old dog. Carlson says that the animal is old, weak and a burden, so it should be killed. The setting of the scene sets a disturbing correlation between lack of usefulness and justification of death. Candy regrets allowing Carlson to kill his dog, a moment that foreshadows George's later decision to kill Lennie himself. This parallel raises important ethical questions about the relationship between dependency, economic usefulness, and the justification of killing as an act of compassion. Crooks is in a different place in the social structure of the ranch. But his social exclusion cannot be divorced from his racial segregation, as his back is injured. He is separated from the white ranch workers, and he does not have the same

opportunities to find companionship and belong. Crooks's marginalisation results from the combined effects of racial discrimination, physical disability, and social isolation. Therefore, an intersectional reading should take into account that the marginalisation of Lennie, Candy, Crooks, and others is a product of the intersection of bodily difference, economic vulnerability, age and racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, these different forms of marginalisation should not be treated as interchangeable. The cognitive impairment of Lennie creates challenges that are different from that of Candy's physical handicap and Crooks' racial isolation. But the ensemble of characters shows a social universe in which there is a condition of affiliation to the dominant social norms. This hierarchy is disrupted by the existence of Curley's wife. She is not said to have a disability, but her isolation by gender is a reflection of the standards of belonging that are male. One can see this normalcy not only in the main cast but in the rest of the cast as well. It is connected to spatial power distribution, work, movement, image and citizens' freedom to become part of the community.

4.6 The Dream of the Farm as an Alternative Space of Belonging

A dream of owning a farm is frequently seen as a part of the American Dream. George and Lennie envision themselves getting to quit their temporary jobs and finding a place where they will work on their own and have some security. But a Disability Studies lens presents a different aspect to this aspiration. The farm is an alternative place where Lennie's abilities and requirements might be met better than in the ranch system. One of his passions is to look after rabbits. All the mention of rabbits can seem silly, but it is also his hope to have a routine and schedule with the same tasks, sensory stimulation, and companionship. The farm will provide the opportunity for a life in which Lennie will not always have to hide his differences, or work out new social rules.

This understanding is aided by Garland-Thomson's definition of fitting. Factors that make the environment more conducive is when the environment's arrangements are in line with the nature and capacity of its inhabitants. The farm George imagines would enable the trio to coordinate their work to the best of their abilities. Lennie could bring in physical strength, Candy could have financial resources and be able to do appropriate work, George could do work in planning and managing. The imagined farm offers greater possibilities for cooperation and belonging, although the unequal distribution of authority between George and Lennie would not necessarily disappear. Yet it envisions a form of cooperation that is more attuned to the differences among individuals than the competitive ranch economy. The dream is thus more than the land. It speaks to a need for security, recognition and a world where dependence does not automatically lead to exclusion. The following interpretation is based on Kittay's concept of interdependence. The farm envisions a community of people who contribute in various ways, not in a particular way of being independent. The ultimate failure of this is important. The failure of the dream is not only an illustration of how fragile individual ambition is but also at the same time, it exposes the challenges of developing an environment that is welcoming when the duty of care and security is entirely borne by economically marginalized people. The farm is an emblem of a different kind of sociality, one that the world cannot support.

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4.7 Lennie's Death and the Ethics of Disability Representation

The most challenging moral dilemma of the novella occurs at the end. Lennie becomes the target of an increasingly determined pursuit following Curley's wife's death. George knows that the other men could be very violent, and kills Lennie himself. It is traditionally thought to be a mercy killing done to avoid a worse fate for Lennie. Clare Lawrence questions the ethical implications of this interpretation, observing that "Steinbeck positions the story so that the reader's sympathies at the end of it lie with George". This narrative emphasis raises an important question about whether George's suffering receives greater attention than Lennie's loss of life. But Disability Studies unsettles this reading by posing the question of the conditions in which death can seem like the only solution to cognitive difference. Lennie's actions have profound repercussions. Lennie's physical strength, fear, impaired judgement, and inability to respond appropriately during a crisis contribute to Curley's wife's accidental death. Intellectually disabled people are not automatically dangerous and a responsible interpretation must not assume that this is so. Embodiment is a point of emphasis here that Siebers has called to attention. Disability Studies does not require one to act as if an impairment-related feature does not impact on behaviour and/or pose a practical risk. The next question is what do people and groups do when faced with those risks. In the world that *Of Mice and Men* inhabit there are not a lot of choices. The social environment offers Lennie few possibilities for protection, humane treatment, or sustained care, leaving him vulnerable to violence, punishment, and institutional confinement. The story then progresses in a manner that suggests that Lennie's life is in conflict with the social structure. Mitchell and Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis aids in elucidating this conclusion. Lennie's handicap propels the events of the story on to their terrible denouement, and Lennie's demise provides the catharsis for George's emotional anguish and moral quandary. This disabled character is thus in a liminal state. Lennie is an important character, and although he does not have the last say in his life at the end, he plays a significant role in the story. Candy's dog's death in Chapter 3 foreshadows Lennie's death and establishes a disturbing parallel between dependency, perceived usefulness, compassion, and killing. But the parallel does not imply that the novella is actually making a direct comparison of the value of a man to that of an animal. Nevertheless, the parallel establishes a narrative pattern in which the killing of a dependent individual may be interpreted as an act of mercy. Chivers looks at disability in Steinbeck and Lawrence's reading of Lennie invites readers to take a critical look at such conventions. In the immediate context George's choice may be interpreted as a means of not to have to go through a continued suffering, but what he needs is wrapped up in the social context where other options may appear less feasible. The conclusion then implies a contrast between individual and collective neglect. While Steinbeck makes his audience feel sympathy for Lennie, the way the story resolves the issue of the difference is by killing off one of the main characters. This is because it is difficult to interpret the novella as an illustration of disability inclusion or a hostile stance towards disabled people. It is notable ethically because the interrelation of care and authority, violence and limits of social accommodation is not worked out.

5. Discussion: Ableism, Normalcy, and the Limits of Social Belonging

The last analysis is an example of how normalcy regulates the social world of *Of Mice and Men*. The ranch can be used to unconsciously model the ideal worker, the one who can produce

physically, think, regulate their emotions, be aware of social cues, be masculine and independent. Those characters who do not meet these expectations are differentially vulnerable. Lennie experiences cognitive and behavioural difficulties that affect his interactions with others and his position within the ranch community. Candy's advancing age and physical disability make him increasingly vulnerable to economic exclusion. Crooks experiences racial segregation alongside the limitations imposed by his physical disability. Curley's wife is out of place in a society which has a male-dominated power system. The experiences demonstrate that there is more to it than just the "normal" description of human attributes. It serves as a normal way to share social benefits and feeling of belongingness. Davis's notion of the normal is the one which makes it visible, that is, it reveals the production of some behaviours and traits as "normal" and others as "deficient" or "deviant". Garland-Thomson's notion of misfitting also helps to explain the relational aspect of disability. Lennie's abilities are not equally feeble; instead, different jobs will require him to use his abilities differently, and with different levels of success. This distinction poses questions on the interpretation that he died because of his personal inability. Finally, Siebers's attention to embodiment is so strong that there is no attempt to overlook the material implications of cognitive difference. Lennie's cognitive difficulties are real, but the social responses to those difficulties are neither inevitable nor neutral.

Many times in the novel, the meaning of disability is made clear: via employment relationships, expectations between people, and institutional relationships of power and care. An example of this was Lennie's protection by George. He gives Lennie the chance to work, but the burden of responsibility for him remains under delicate personal relations. The relationship between George and Lennie illustrates Kittay's emphasis on human dependency while exposing the limitations of care when responsibility rests almost entirely upon one individual. There are different ways in which humans require care, but dependency is not a concern when it is not visibly apparent. An alternative social organization is provided in the farm dream. It is a speculated form of cooperation, if it occurs at all, that 'belonging' can be through the use of different capacities and aiding each other rather than following another model of productivity. But that was the dream, and what makes it difficult to keep in a place of poverty and jobs that are at the whim of the market.

The novella has a surprising conclusion that reveals the most disturbing aspect of this social structure. Lennie's death appears to be a resolution to an issue which the community around them cannot seem to solve. The themes of disability as a tragedy, a handicap, and a death sentence, however, are implicit in the story's ending as well. Mitchell and Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis helps explain the significance of this tragic ending. The disability of Lennie is the reason the story is marked by conflict and emotional tension, but the answer needs to be to take away the character that has caused the conflict. The image of this becomes very ambivalent. The representation of Lennie's disability raises questions about autonomy, particularly because his actions and decisions are frequently interpreted and controlled by others. That is why it is significant for Disability Studies. *Of Mice and Men* does not provide a medicalized account of disability as a condition, but rather it portrays how physical and mental differences come to acquire significance in the context of the labor market, manhood, stigma, care, and institutional authority. The novella is an

interrogation of security and belonging for individuals who do not conform to dominant social expectations in regards to dominant culture, and what it means to be what one is and to be secure. Unfortunately, Steinbeck's social world is not able to provide a lasting solution because the story ends tragically.

6. Conclusion

The Disability Studies reading of the novella *Of Mice and Men* shows that the tragedy of the novella is already social and is part of the construction of normality and the difference of the body and the mind. Although Lennie experiences significant cognitive difficulties, he possesses considerable physical strength and the capacity to perform demanding manual labour. The role is created by the interaction of difference in thinking, economic security, stigma, reduced social support, and expectations about productivity, autonomy, and behaviour within the institutions. Davis's theory of normalcy helps explain how the ranch establishes behavioural and economic standards that marginalise individuals who fail to conform. The concept of misfitting sheds some light on the importance of the match between a person's capabilities and the environmental needs. The theory of stigma provided by Goffman may help to account for the different approaches that George employs to the social interpretation of Lennie's difference and Kittay's emphasis on dependency to discuss the autonomy of care and sociality. The experience of Crooks' and Candy's lives also demonstrate the intersections of disability and age and of race and economic disadvantage. The hierarchy is broader: social identity and physical capacity dictate employment, dignity and belonging. The imagined farm represents an alternative to the hierarchical social structure of the ranch. It is an opportunity to have an environment that is focused on collaborating and focused on different capacities, not on individual productivity. However, the lack of fulfillment of this dream makes private solutions for structural problems to appear short-sighted. The moral at the end of the novella is unclear. George's decision to kill Lennie may be interpreted as an attempt to prevent further violence, but it also exposes society's limited understanding of cognitive difference and its failure to provide humane alternatives. Steinbeck's representation combines sympathy for Lennie with animalisation, infantilisation, paternalism, and a tragic conclusion that raises important ethical questions about disability. The value of this novella does not lie in the concept of disability it develops or even completes; but as a whole it exposes the social institutions which make difference vulnerable. Ultimately, Of Mice and Men suggests that the tragedy associated with disability cannot be understood solely through the limitations of an individual body or mind. It also needs to be examined within the context of the expectations, institutions and power relations that define the belongingness of who lives, of who is dependent, and of who is permitted to differ in their belonging.

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