

Contextualizing Intellectual Disability in American Literature with Special Reference to *Of Mice and Men* (1937)

This paper examines the representation of intellectual disability in American literature through a close and critical reading of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a seminal work that vividly reflects the social realities of Depression-era America. Situating the novel within the broader cultural, historical, and economic context of the early twentieth century, the study highlights a period marked by widespread poverty, social instability, and limited medical, psychological, and social understanding of intellectual disability. Within such a climate, individuals with intellectual impairments were often marginalized, misunderstood, and excluded from mainstream social life. By focusing on the character of Lennie Small, the paper argues that Steinbeck presents intellectual disability not merely as an individual or biological condition but as a socially constructed experience shaped by economic hardship, social prejudice, and institutional neglect. Lennie's vulnerability exposes the harshness of a society that values productivity, physical strength, and independence, thereby revealing how disability becomes a site of social exclusion and moral anxiety.

Through a sustained analysis of Lennie's interactions with other characters—particularly George, Curley, and Curley's wife—the paper explores how intellectual disability influences identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and power dynamics within the narrative. George's role as Lennie's caretaker illustrates the complex relationship between protection and control, where care is intertwined with authority and surveillance. Lennie's encounters with Curley and Curley's wife further reveal how disability renders him vulnerable to exploitation, fear, and violence, reinforcing his precarious position within the social hierarchy of the ranch. These interactions demonstrate how intellectually disabled individuals are often perceived as both childlike and threatening, a contradiction that results in further marginalization. By emphasizing Lennie's emotional depth, innocence, and desire for belonging, Steinbeck complicates stereotypical representations of disability and invites readers to recognize Lennie's humanity beyond his impairment.

Moreover, this research engages with disability studies perspectives to interrogate the ethical, cultural, and social implications of *Of Mice and Men*. The paper examines how the novel reflects dominant attitudes toward intellectual disability during the 1930s, particularly the absence of social support systems and the normalization of exclusion and institutionalization. At the same time, Steinbeck's narrative exposes the failure of social structures to accommodate vulnerability and difference, especially within a capitalist framework that prioritizes efficiency and self-reliance. By foregrounding the intersection of disability, class, and masculinity, the study demonstrates how intellectual disability is entangled with economic precarity and ideals of male strength and autonomy. Ultimately, this paper aims to enrich contemporary disability discourse by encouraging more inclusive, empathetic, and critically informed readings of canonical American literature, thereby challenging ableist assumptions and expanding the scope of literary interpretation.