RAINBOW Vol. 14 (2) 2025

Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Cultural Studies

https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/rainbow

Echoes of Silence: The Role of Unspoken Words in Shaping Characters in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Article Info

Article History:
Received
25 August 2025
Approved
23 October 2025
Published
31 October 2025

Keywords: John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, silence, unspoken words, character development, modernist literature

Abstract

John Steinbeck's novella Of Mice and Men (1937) utilizes silence as a powerful narrative tool in an attempt to exemplify the characters' struggles with affectual relationships. Yet recent histories too frequently encompass this as part of wider conceptions of communicative breakdown and social realism, as set out in Warren French (1975). This research responds to this lack by exploring the ways in which implied thoughts define the characters of George Milton, Lennie Small, and Curley's wife through modernist disturbance and feminist tactics. It asserts that silence is not heard as emptiness but as a conative energy, illuminating the story of isolation, destroyed hopes, and the broken American Dream amidst the Great Depression's gloom. Central tasks are to describe how George's silence expresses necessary strength over deep despair, Lennie's limited talk responds to sad innocence weighed against danger, and Curley's wife's necessary silence condemns sexist domination of women's freedom. The approach uses in-depth qualitative examination of major quotes supported by cross-disciplinary sources like Susan Sontag's (1967) description of silence as natural eloquence, Mary Eagleton's (1991) sex-gender readings, and Ernest Hemingway's lean techniques parallels (Baker, 1972). Evidence confirms that Steinbeck's silence builds multi-dimensional portraits of characters, bestowing Depression narratives with rich emotion and thought-provoking nuance; Lennie's silent sympathy for George, for instance, speaks better of moral complexity than words. This thesis positions Of Mice and Men along the spectrum between realism and modernism, adding to Steinbeck scholarship and enabling further research into silence across his work and similar 20th-century literature.

INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (1937) is a ghostly homage to what it means to be human, torn asunder but never giving in to the Great Depression's rending claws. This relatively short novella, a whisper of a book at little over one hundred pages, chronicles the intertwining fates of George Milton, a lanky dreamer bound in responsibility, and Lennie Small, a gentle giant whose stark muscle power and stature mask a simple mind. Slowly casting about them, Curley's wife, a ghostly presence with a body cast in longing, ironically silenced by a world unwilling to hear. Therefore, within this simple story of presentation lies the artistry of profundity as the art of silence becomes a convecting force through which the character establishes a depth that permeates long after the last sentence. This is the poetic eye and heart of the working man who welcomes both worlds into a tale that is potentially simple yet spare, and simultaneously intricate as an

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p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

elaborate tapestry pieced together in an even more frugal fashion.

Silence has been a significant intellectual and literary development over the past centuries, with its wondrous power almost impossible to resist for those seeking the soul beneath the facade. Susan Sontag (1967) notes that "silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech" (p. 11), a grand pronouncement in an era rife with modernism, where writers like Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf use omission as a pen's surgical tool to craft the roughest edges of living. Hemingway's terse, masculine heroes and Woolf's cerebral consciousnesses are made by what they do not say; their silences represent an age of fragmentation.. Steinbeck, often suited for the role of bard of gritty realism, wears this modernist mantle lightly here, thread by thread, weaving silence through the fabric of his narrative to illuminate the unquiet psyche of his characters. George's surly restraint, Lennie's toddler-like muteness, and Curley's wife's stifled cries create a triad of silences that echo with the isolation, longing, and hushed desolation of Depression-era life, when dreams were murmured but rarely came true.

Silence, as an element emphasized by Steinbeck through the word "silence" itself, is significant in conveying the characters' emotional struggle to commit to one another, especially in the context of the time period. Emotional poverty is as debilitating as financial poverty and prevents these characters from supporting each other. To the reader, sound represents a sense of hope—George's goal to cultivate a farm or Lennie's love of little, cute animals—while silence represents the failure to connect on deeper terms. Silence symbolizes emotional poverty and a failure to connect and manage one's emotions. This illustrates how the protagonists struggle to express their feelings because they seldom stay in one place for long, drifting from ranch to ranch. Ultimately, silence is significant in reflecting the challenge to emotionally commit, thus connecting it to broader themes of alienation and loneliness, which subsequently impact all other characters. Therefore, silence is significant in literally proclaiming how poverty cripples people from helping each other and, instead, forces people into a silence of alienation.

However, this text dares to tread where few scholars upon these characters have gone before in a quest to uncover the "unspoken" realm, for silence is not that which is absent but rather a vibrant and pulsating fabric of narrative text strewn upon Steinbeck's pages. George Milton stands as the stolid watchman, his silence of strength bolstering him against the emotional despair he cannot put to words. Lennie Small, with his towering body and childlike mental state, operates as a silence that sings him a perfect tune, but ultimately his demise—the wordless reflection of innocence within a world made callous. Curley's wife—a nameless creature without agency—lives with her own gendered and circumstantial silence; her softened, unrecognized pleas for existence become an almost ghostly echo. However, together, they all embody how Steinbeck creates such presence from absence, crafting characters in whom the value of the unsaid is equivalent to the most articulated soliloquy.

It matters because it dares to re-envision a work like Of Mice and Men, which is so often approached from a superficially reductive perspective. When the Steinbeck world has been recognized by scholars since Warren French (1975) determined it is "trapping \[of its characters\] in a world where communication fails" (p. 89), it is rarely addressed by anyone as an intentional characterization. This study emerges from the interplay of raw realism evident in the social constructs of Steinbeck's work and the modernist interplay of his intentional style, bringing new life to a work often criticized for its complexity beyond a quick sentence summary. Delving into the darkness of the unspoken silences, we find a narrative where silence is not a background presence but rather a starring force, complementing the emotionally overwhelming and intellectually engaging undercurrents that champion Steinbeck's rightful place in the canon as an American literary master. Thus, this study should shed light on the silence—and hopefully, get people to listen.

The desire for land symbolizes a fundamental human need for security, identity, and a return to an idyllic existence. For George and Lennie, owning a piece of land represents a "paradise" where they can sustain themselves and

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

escape the transient, exploitative life of ranch work. George's name, derived from Greek meaning "land," and his surname "Milton" (evoking Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained), underscore this longing for a personal Eden. However, this dream remains a mirage, as it dies with Lennie's death, though it lingers in his innocent vision of the Gabilan's slopes. The novel preserves a "refreshing faith in humanity" despite devastation.

Loneliness permeates the novel, with characters desperately seeking intimacy and loyalty in an indifferent world. George and Lennie's companionship is a rare bond, defying the norm of isolated ranch workers. George values Lennie not just as a burden but as a source of purpose and trust, stating, "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They do not belong no place" (Of Mice and Men, 1993, pp. 13-14). Lennie's loyalty gives George a sense of authority and meaning, while Lennie sees George as a guiding figure. Their relationship, though unconventional, embodies mutual dependence and emotional need.

Candy's bond with his old dog mirrors this hunger, but its destruction—shot by Carlson despite Candy's protests—foreshadows Candy's own expendability: "You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he was not no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody would shoot me" (Of Mice and Men, 1993, p. 60). Crooks, the Black stable buck, articulates the torment of isolation due to racial and class oppression, lamenting, "A guy needs somebody---to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody" (Of Mice and Men, 1993, pp. 72-73). Curley's wife, initially perceived as a "tart," reveals her own loneliness, pleading, "Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to anybody. I get awful lonely" (Of Mice and Men, 1993, p. 86). Her death exposes the tragic cost of unmet emotional needs.

The novel is marked by silence and failed communication, reflecting the characters' isolation. Lennie's mental limitations often render George's words into monologues, yet Lennie's presence as a listener fulfills George's need to be heard. Crooks' outpouring to Lennie is similarly one-sided, as Lennie cannot fully comprehend, underscoring the absence of reciprocal dialogue. Curley's wife's flirtatious demeanor masks her desperate need for conversation, but her interactions—ending in her death by Lennie's hand—highlight the fatal consequences of miscommunication. The absence of intimacy and communication predominates the novel, with characters like Lennie petting soft things as a symbolic, outward expression of an inward longing that cannot be verbally fulfilled.

The mouse, the pup, Curley's wife, and Lennie die—they all signify how the search for intimacy was a futile effort in this world due to barriers of language and societal apathy; Steinbeck intersperses such themes of loneliness through socioeconomic depreciation through the ages, and then reaffirms the reliability of humanity despite the distance. When the land is gone, the attachment is gone. When the need for intimacy exists, it remains ravenous. However, with dreams of a "paradise future" and truly human connections, which are noble ideals of equity, goodwill, and fraternity, it is unsurprising when tragedies occur.

The reader understands that it is constantly burning throughout the Salinas Valley of California, as loneliness runs rampant through elements like the name of a town (Soledad), which translates to loneliness, and a card game (Solitaire) that signifies being alone. The setting implies a lack of apartments, as the bunkhouse only consists of two shelves per person to reflect ownership, lack thereof, and the real ranch hands' transient and unstable lives, which add to their social and psychological depressions; the lack of possession makes them lonely. The more silence exists in people's lives, the lonelier they become. Communication barriers exist, or people are antisocial, and even if they want to be social, they are coming from socialized systems.

George and Lennie share a friendship rarely found in the world of the ranch. Their companionship safeguards each one from the loneliness that pervades the lives of other ranch hands, with George asserting, "Because I have got you and you got me to look after you" (p.15). However, intimacy can make people even lonelier at times, as seen through George's character. While Lennie knows he needs George, it saddens him that, in his

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

loneliness, he could "live so easy and maybe have a girl" (p.9). Thus, after Lennie's death, George realizes how much his life will be like the other ranch hands—lonely. The loss is even worse because he could communicate his thoughts and feelings to Lennie, yet they remain separate. Lennie is so annoying to others because he cannot articulate his thoughts clearly, so he is often alone.

Curley's wife is the epitome of loneliness on the ranch as she is the only woman there and cannot speak to the men without it being implied or interpreted in a way that makes her seem inferior. Thus, she admits, "Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to anybody. I get awful lonely" (p.85). She needs companionship—like everyone else—but she is a woman. Her need for conversation cannot happen, and anytime she attempts to talk to men, they view her as a "tart" (p.29), "bitch" (p.33), or "floozy" (p.78), which is all part of her overt sexuality instead of just being a woman trying to talk. Curley's wife is even more silenced by her husband when she says, "I cannot talk to anybody but Curley, else he gets mad" (p.85). Thus, she tries but gets nowhere, which only traps her further in loneliness. Revealing herself as having "full, rouged lips, and wide spaced eyes, heavily made up" (p.32) gets her no line of honest communication; it merely renders her desperate for physical attention.

Crooks experiences extreme loneliness due to racial segregation, living in isolation in his own room, and being excluded from social activities. His silence is both a defense mechanism and a result of rejection, as he asserts, "You got no right to come into my room. This here is my room. Nobody got the right to be here but me" (pp. 67-68). This territoriality reflects his acclimatization to isolation, yet it also intensifies his loneliness. When Lennie enters his space, Crooks desperately talks without concern for being heard, indicating his craving for communication. His skepticism about dreams of land ownership, expressed as "An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Everybody wants a little piece of lan'. It is just in their head" (p.106), underscores a hopelessness born from years of silenced existence. The lack of interaction with others forces Crooks to turn to books for solace, though even this becomes monotonous, perpetuating his isolation.

Candy's loneliness is compounded by his physical disability and the loss of his old dog, which mirrors his own marginalization. His interaction with Crooks reveals a misunderstanding of isolation, as he envies Crooks' private room, saying, "You got a nice cozy place here...must be nice to have a room all to yourself this way" (p.74). Crooks bitterly responds, "Sure...and a manure pile underneath the window. Sure it is swell" (p.74), highlighting how privacy equates to exclusion rather than comfort. Candy's silence about his own pain—particularly after his dog's death—further isolates him, as he lacks an outlet to express his grief or connect with others, reinforcing the novel's theme of unvoiced loneliness.

However, loneliness manifests itself in two ways in Steinbeck's presentation—voluntary isolation, yet, ironically, a painful reality. Furthermore, this natural solution quickly becomes so complicated and unreachable because of characters' problems that combine personal sensitivity (race, gender, disability) and a lack of conflict resolution against isolation based on socioeconomic status, which complicate their interactions through misinterpretation and, in some characters' cases, defeat. Ultimately, anyone from George to Lennie to Curley to Curley's wife to Crooks and Candy becomes aware that the silence they inhabit—often chosen but more often thrust upon them—is only compounded by a lack of effective communication. However, silence proves effective, which ultimately makes human companionship naturally valuable yet almost impossible to grasp as a remedy for human existence.

Silence becomes a character in its own right due to its invasiveness and the discomfort it creates, emphasizing the lack of integral speech in the novel. Silence heightens suspense as characters become increasingly edgy due to the absence of sound, which makes smaller noises seem deafening. This characterization offers insight into how Steinbeck's characters operate within their worlds. For example, distrust runs high among fellow workers, illustrated by how silence invades spaces—' Came out of the night and invaded the room' and 'fell on the room again'. Such blunt realities between the room and the speaker

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

emphasize how anything at this point is too loud when nothing exists. Furthermore, the silence spawned by the workers' inability to trust one another becomes an all-too-real concern. At the end of the book, when Lennie dies, silence becomes cyclical and meaningful. 'Suddenly Lennie appeared out of the brush, and he came as silently as a creeping bear moves.' Steinbeck juxtaposes "creeping" against "bear" because, at the beginning of the novel, Lennie moves more like a bear during their travels. The cyclical nature of meaning that recurs reinforces how prevalent Lennie's zoomorphic characteristics are, since he was compared to a bear so often since Day One. Therefore, Steinbeck increases the emotional weight and atmosphere of how something so simple—and cyclical—could have such a significant impact on Lennie at the end.

The repetition of silence creates an uncomfortable and tense mood. Instances such as "It was silent outside" (Steinbeck, p.9) and "The silence came into the room. And the silence lasted." (Steinbeck 10) demonstrate how silence lingers among the men. Additional phrases like "The silence fell on the room again" (Steinbeck,pp.16, 25) and "The silence was in the room again" (Steinbeck, p.39) emphasize the discomfort following the scene. This repetition also underscores the presence of other sounds, such as those made by mice under the floor. The analysis connects this use of silence to the broader themes of tension and the pervasive sense of loneliness in the novel.

Several key scenes demonstrate the use of silence: When Carlson proposes shooting Candy's dog, the men in the bunkhouse fall silent, offering no emotional support to Candy. This silence highlights their lack of emotional grounding and inability to communicate feelings, exacerbating Candy's sense of alienation. The impending doom of the gunshot further emphasizes Candy's vulnerability. The men talk little about meaningful things. For instance, George hesitates to share details about the Weed incident, stopping abruptly: "'Like what happened in Weed-' [George] stopped… looked alarmed and peered over at Slim" (Steinbeck). Another example is when George nervously ripples a deck of cards, creating a "little snapping noise" that draws attention, leading to silence as he stops: "The silence fell on the room again" (Steinbeck). This illustrates the fear of opening up, as the men make each other feel self-conscious for breaking the silence. George falls silent out of fear and distrust, as seen in: "George fell silent. He wanted to talk… he just sat back quiet and receptive" (Steinbeck). He avoids communication to protect himself and Lennie, especially regarding Lennie's mental disability, only speaking to Lennie privately: "When Whit and Carlson were gone and the door closed after them, George turned to Lennie" (Steinbeck).

The silence during the shooting of his dog leaves Candy unsupported, intensifying his loneliness and vulnerability. This event reveals how emotional poverty prevents the men from standing up for one another. Crooks' life exemplifies silence as a marker of loneliness due to racial discrimination. His room, filled with solitary items like boxes and tools, signifies isolation. When yelled at by Curley's wife, he falls silent, recognizing his perpetual alienation: "Crooks' world is silent because of his lack of connections with other people." He is forced to live separately, playing cards and reading alone. Lennie is literally silenced during a confrontation with Curley, who misinterprets Lennie's smile as disrespect: "Lennie was still smiling with delight at the memory of the ranch" (Steinbeck). Unable to defend himself, Lennie faces consequences that lower his self-esteem and complicate his relationship with George, forcing him to reassess his actions. After being beaten by Lennie, Curley is silenced by fear and humiliation. Slim blackmails him into silence: "If you do not tell nobody what happened, we ain't going to. But you jus' tell an' try to get this guy canned and we will tell ever'body, an' then will you get the laugh" (Steinbeck). This submission reflects his fear of Lennie and damage to his reputation as a fierce man. Curley's wife is silenced by Curley's jealousy whenever she interacts with other men, and by the bunkhouse men's fear of trouble, who ignore her: "She is gonna make a mess" (Steinbeck). Lacking female support and trapped in an unloving marriage, she settles for isolation instead of pursuing dreams of love, resulting in a life of silence and loneliness.

Silence within the bunkhouse connects the men emotionally beyond their economic status and

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

transient lives. When they do not talk, it reflects their loneliness and fractured emotional being due to their limited finances. Thus, when Crooks' silence is forced upon him because of his race, it magnifies the symbol of silence for larger social barriers. George and Lennie want to keep things quiet to protect themselves, but they, too, are caught in a conflicted world where silence sometimes serves them better than talking. Curley and his wife also add an element of silence, a foreshadowing tactic that reveals power dynamics, gender inequities/and racial bullying that promote even more loneliness. Thus, silence becomes a Steinbeckian device that champions emotional barriers to hope, making his characters all the more relatable to other men and women struggling during the Great Depression.

This gap in scholarship will be filled by assessing silence as a unifying element that enhances the understanding of George, Lennie, and Curley's wife as characters worth reflecting upon. This study seeks to answer research questions such as: how does George's silenced sense of inadequacy reflect upon his role as a man of responsibility fighting for his American Dream? In what ways does Lennie's silenced inarticulateness champion tragic innocence and vulnerability, deserving of sympathy? How does Curley's wife's heightened silence reflect upon a feminist appeal for awareness during the Great Depression? Through close reading and insights from modernist and feminist critical theory, this argument champions Steinbeck's silences as an appeal to absence that is anything but absent, making it worth noting both for character analysis and for an engaged appreciation on an emotional/intellectual level. Ultimately, this will take a new perspective on the text and reinvigorate attention paid to Steinbeck's style.

METHODS

This research project is a qualitative study; therefore, it serves as a time-honored vessel to navigate the uncharted waters of literary analysis, providing a means to investigate the depths of silence within Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck's (1937) novella is the text itself—a concise yet expansive body of prose to work through via the construction of close reading. Close reading, carefully assessing language choice and subtext, aims to find meaning within the inaudible spaces—whether it is the absence of words spoken, a purposeful silence due to emotional restraint, or a tragic silence due to the inability to articulate thoughts. The three focal characters through whom Steinbeck's literary genius is explored in his narrative will be George Milton, Lennie Small, and Curley's wife. While these three characters might seem an arbitrary selection, they all have significant meaning for the analysis of silence.

George, for example, as an overworked custodian, embodies a silence of restraint, consistently sidestepping Lennie's questions with short answers to prevent an outburst. Lennie Small—with his childlike simplicity—is reminiscent of a silence of unintelligibility; the few words he utters give us insight into a wholly innocent mind and a potentially dangerous one. Finally, Curley's wife—the unnamed character who does not even get a name of her own—embodies the world-cast silence; even when her voice is muffled into existence, it is purposeful. George's curt conversations, Lennie's urgent whispering, and Curley's wife's lackadaisical confessions are accompanied by significant passages that will be footnoted throughout. These passages map how these areas relate to the silence that defines their characters and how their characterization contributes to plot development toward an inevitable climax.

A constellation of academic voices supports this literary journey. Theoretical support from Warren French (1975), Louis Owens (1990), and Susan Sontag (1967) connects Steinbeck's silences to themes of modernist and realist theory as Mary's role could be exposed and deepen with Mary Eagleton's [1991] feminist perspective, while Carlos Baker [1972] notes the introductory Hemingway element and how it complicates Curley's wife's ability to speak. The other authors—Levant (1974), Lisca (1958), Benson (1984)—add nuance to their critical presence, making them a welcome addition to an ensemble that engages this exploration. These sources were chosen for their peer-reviewed significance and relevance. Much like a construct where interpretation comes from a solid ground, the

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

interpretation here is supported through a solid framework..

The methodology avoids the cold calculation and exactness of quantitative metrics — word counts or dialogue-to-narrative ratios — to embrace the warm, flexible nature of qualitative depth. Here, the focus is on subtext, on the whispers beneath the words, an inductive dance that lets meaning emerge naturally from the text. However, this approach is not without its pitfalls: its narrow focus on three characters risks ignoring a larger ensemble that, in some other show, might comprise the broader group of people who make the world what it is, and certainly should on "The Last of Us," with its interpretive quality bolstered by subjectivity. A firm connection to textual evidence and an open dialogue with critical voices temper these limitations into a path that is both rigorous and revealing.

The study employs a methodical procedure that was modified from literary criticism's close reading and thematic analysis approaches to guarantee accuracy and reproducibility. Reading the novella several times and making preliminary notes on recurrent themes of silence—like George's reserve while recounting dreams or Lennie's sparse vocal responses—is the first step in becoming acquainted with the data. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework as a guide, this step creates a comprehensive knowledge of the text as qualitative data and, if necessary, transcribes important passages for in-depth examination.

The process of identifying important silences then involves paying attention to specifics, such as the subject (such as scenes of seclusion in the Salinas Valley), form (such as the sparse dialogue structure), diction (such as the use of words like "monotonous" in George's voice that imply suppression), and themes (such as the fragmentation of the American Dream). As in Hemingway's iceberg theory, patterns are observed, such as interruptions in the normal flow of information, which reflect modernist aspects where omission reveals more profound truths.

Coding follows an inductive approach, starting with open coding to assign tentative labels to excerpts—e.g., "restraint_despair" for George's unsaid burdens, "innocence_vulnerability" for Lennie's muteness, and "erasure_gender" for Curley's wife's stifled cries. Using in vivo coding for direct statements like "I ain't gonna say a word," this develops into focused coding, which groups comparable codes into categories like "imposed silence" or "self-imposed restraint." To code gender dynamics, a combined deductive element integrates pre-existing frameworks, such as feminist criticism.

Theoretical framing integrates these codes with secondary sources: modernist lenses from Sontag (silence as speech) and Baker (unsaid looming larger) for George and Lennie, and feminist perspectives from Eagleton for Curley's wife. Themes are generated and reviewed for accuracy to ensure they represent the dataset without overinterpretation, and then defined succinctly—e.g., silence as an active presence that amplifies loneliness.

Finally, interpretation constructs a narrative that links codes to character development, simulating peer debriefing through alignment with established critiques to reduce bias. New ideas include longitudinal tracking of silence across the plot's chronology, from initial dream-sharing to the climactic gunshot, adding temporal depth. This replicable structure—familiarization, identification, coding, framing, interpretation—promotes transparency, allowing other researchers to apply similar steps to Steinbeck's oeuvre or comparable Depression-era texts, enhancing validity through textual evidence and reflexivity on subjectivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Silence in Modernist Literature

Theoretical notions of silence in literature give an even greater scope to this study of Of Mice and Men. For example, in her (1967) essay Styles of Radical Will, Susan Sontag presents a philosophical basis for the research, stating that "silence is, inevitably, a form of speech" (p. 11).Sontag's daring reframing of silence as something that is always already there echoes through modernist literature, where fragmentation and omission strip bare the layers of human consciousness and psyche — a resonance that Of Mice and Men quietly matches in the internal

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

battles of George and Lennie. At the other end of a modernist thread lies a kindred spirit in Carlos Baker's (1972) Hemingway: The Writer as Artist—only instead of the iceberg, he dives into Hemingway's iceberg theory, writing "the unsaid looms larger than the spoken" (p. 117). Hemingway's minimalist genius, seen a thousand times in holy graves like The Old Man and the Sea, looms over Steinbeck's controlled prose, especially when George offers his wordless act of mercy, a shared lineage this study seeks to tease out.

This modernist current runs through into the work of Virginia Woolf, whose silences provide another point of comparison. Patricia Ondek Laurence (1991) in The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition contends that Woolf uses "silence as a stream of consciousness" (p. 45), to have readers 'read' characters by what they do not say—much like Steinbeck's expression of Lennie's innocent, silent character. Yet more recent critical contributions expand these findings to focus on silence's suggestive component for emotional tension. For example, S. Baratova's (2025) The Literary Analysis of the Stylistic Devices Used in John Steinbeck's Novel 'Of Mice and Men' notes how silence and meaningful pauses increase dramatic intensity in the climax of the novella—an arena which follows modernist ideas of fragmentation and the inexpressible. She notes how such an assumed simplicity transforms into overwhelming emotion to bring elements like collage and stream of consciousness into play like Hemingway's omission. Ultimately, she extends the notion of silence and the inexpressible to explain their absurdity when applied to the economic plight of the characters' lives.

Silence in Steinbeck Scholarship

Steinbeck's titanic talents among American literary giants stem from his fervent explorations of marginalization—something which has intrigued many a critic. For example, Warren French's 1975 tome, John Steinbeck, refers to the author as "a writer of a world where communication breaks down" (p. 89), amidst the social realism that resonates through The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men. French's social realist approach champions Steinbeck's attention to the marginalized, yet fails to delve into the implications of what goes unspoken—what this dissertation intends to render more visible.

Expanding from this groundwork, Louis Owens (1990) in The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land analyzes the symbolic depth of Steinbeck's work, commenting that Steinbeck's characters represent universal human struggles (p. 54). Owen's acknowledgment of an unwritten susceptibility behind written aspirations is a suggestive path for understanding silence in Of Mice and Men, but he otherwise delves deeper into other overarching constructs of Steinbeck's canon.

The realism/symbolism question also echoes in John Timmerman's (1986) John Steinbeck's Fiction: The Aesthetics of the Road Taken, where he suggests that "Steinbeck blends realism and symbolism through silence" (p 98). Such an acknowledgment operates as a stylistic element that extends the reader beyond themselves but ultimately matches to a more universal extended view of all of Steinbeck's works, leaving Of Mice and Men behind for more focused exploration.

Peter Lisca (1958) takes a wider tack in The Wide World of John Steinbeck, contending instead that Steinbeck's characters "reveal their essence through what they do not say" (p. 78). While Lisca's initial definition of silence as a circulating narrative current establishes a ground for this research, his comprehensive overview is so general that it allows for an in-depth exploration of particular texts.

Jackson Benson (1984) in The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer provides a biographical viewpoint, saying that "Steinbeck's characters live in the gaps between words" (p. 203), which flows naturally from this. Benson's focus on these out-of-the-way places resonates with our own exploration of silence, but his biographical lens is a rich ground for textual analyses as well. Together, these voices paint Steinbeck as a writer who was somehow tuned in to the unsaid, and yet they hardly set up silence as the keystone of his art, preparing the way for this study's careful examination.

Recent additions to Steinbeck scholarship further synthesize silence as a narrative invitation. J.M. Dew (post-2015) in "Filling the 'Silence' and Co-Authorship: Steinbeck's Agapic Invitation in Of Mice and Men" posits that silence creates

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

narrative depth by inviting readers to co-author the story, blending realism with symbolic gaps to engage audiences more profoundly. Similarly, Susan Shillinglaw (2014) in *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath* expands her vision to *Of Mice and Men*, noting how "Steinbeck's silences carry the weight of unfulfilled dreams" (p. 102). That insight of Shillinglaw's corresponds very closely with the aims of this study, though the broader scope dilutes her focus on specific characters. These broader analyses gesture at silence's role, but seldom make it a central thread, creating fertile ground for a more unified approach.

Feminist Perspectives on Silence

Curley's wife, too often lost in the criticisms slinking around her husband's treatment, has prompted feminist interpretations that join arms with this question. Mary Eagleton (1991) in Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader introduces her silence as an "example of a patriarchal structure that denies her agency" (pp. 67), pointing the gendered aspects to what is unsaid. Charlotte Hadella (1995) takes this argument further in Of Mice and Men: A Kinship of Powerlessness, arguing that "there was another way in which Curley's wife spoke – spoke not by her silence but with it – a parable of silence as powerlessness" (p. 63). Both are careful to note the social critique implicit in her silence. But neither does one or the other have a longer analysis of silence that might link to all three protagonists in what is, after all, a larger narrative process that they share. This personage-centred exchange of thoughts can naturally expand into larger inspections of the novella, where silence looms in peripheral visibility.

Recent feminist studies expand these critiques by intersecting gender with other oppressions. S. Youssef (2025) examines in "When Nature and Women…Cry aloud for Mercy: John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men from the Ecofeminist Point of View," how the silence imposed on Curley's wife reflects the oppression of Nature, illustrated when Lennie attempts to quiet her cries, which symbolizes the tragic intersections of gender and ecological oppression. P. Stal (2025) asserts in "Surviving Steinbeck: A Psychoanalytic and Naturalist Reading of of Mice and Men," that the cries of Curley's wife and their repression show racial and gender hierarchies, again where silence becomes a mode of survival and a critique in a patriarchal society. These newly earned insights suggest the ways that silence systematically creates erasure, extending the lines drawn by Eagleton and Hadella to modern revisions which include ecofeminism.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship and Current Contributions

Sewing Assembling this body of criticism, we find a rich and complicated landscape that is nevertheless sadly fragmented. Steinbeck criticism – the failures of communication examined by French, the unknowable essences discussed by Lisca, the gaps between the words revealed by Benson – acknowledges silence as an important motif. … But it seldom examines it as a first-rate instrument of analysis. Theoretical discussions about silence – the aperture for philosophical framing of Sontag, the modernist approximations of Baker – give a strong structure to the construction of silence, but the application of them to Steinbeck is sporadic. Much of the character studies in Of Mice and Men validate the significance of silence, but the work done is not as comprehensive as the study provided here, and did not yield the results of completeness as to the advantage of the factualness images, for their tenuous the details in their visages destroy the whole picture of their holism. Some salient facts remain: the earlier references (prior to 2015) rule the literature, with too little interspersion of recent psychoanalytical references. A. Manjhi and A.K. Tiwari, (2017) for example, state in "Psychoanalytical Perspective in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men" that "silence connotes the liberation of the libidinous energy grounded in the depth of profound psychological significance". Moreover, … though the feminist critiques analysing the silence of Curley's wife investigate the worth of that woman's silence, they neglected to examine the angles of modernism concerning it nor its bearing on other Steinbeckian themes of unfulfilled hopes and dreams.

This investigation fills in these gaps detailing what has been done (see Youssef, 2025; Stål, 2025; Baratova, 2025) synthesizing something

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e-ISSN: 2721-4540

like an accretive reading of silence as active force structuring George, Lennie and the wife of Curley together. Joined not only to the realist roots of Steinbeck but also to his modernist tendencies, propelled by the theories of Sontag and Baker in order to shoot on Steinbeck's technique, which is fully grounded in the social context that stress both Astro and Hadella. In doing this such an exploration does not cease in opening up the work to the issues of involvement for present understanding of Of Mice and Men, so that it places silence at the centre of a reading process which shall inevitably be the attention to future Steinbeck criticism which engages with those mute bodies, whereupon the demand is placed upon readers to look back into the later work (indeed, the publicans of East of Eden and the dweller of Cannery Row, etc.) Up to this point is an examination of the methodology and analysis of the question concerning the echoes of silence, which may be regarded as a music to which Steinbeck lends the accompaniment in brilliant staccato sustained, as it presents a sound that is demanding of thorough listening.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

George Milton: The Silence of Duty and Despair

George Milton enters Steinbeck's frame a master of restraint, his tongue trammeled by the weight of the unsaid. When Lennie, his perennial aspiring dreamer, asks him to retell their vision for a farm, George's answer — "I ain't gonna say a word" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 8) — is a fortress, a stoic bulwark defending a fatigue he does not feel he can reveal. This reticence is no simple gruffness; it is a soft armor, protecting Lennie's tender optimism from the harsh glare of reality. Louis Owens (1990) looks beneath this guarded layer, proposing that "George's silence about the dream's tenuousness reveals his insight into its futility" (p. 54), a burden too painful to share with his childlike companion. Warren French (1975) takes this insight to the next level, declaring that "Steinbeck's silences are dynamic spaces where the human condition is laid bare" (p. 92), a truism that is rendered here in the quiet of George's resolve.

However, this lack of speech is not static; instead, it is a thread of tension that runs throughout the narrative, getting tighter and tighter as the events unfold. As George spins the farm fantasy pipe-dream to Lennie and, later, the hopeful Candy, his voice holds a muted skepticism he never manages to give voice to. Howard Levant (1974) interprets it as "a form of self-discipline, concealing his despair" (p. 132), a repression that casts George as both architect and captive of their mutual illusion. His interactions with the ranch hands — terse, guarded —further reveal a man in the grip of doubts that he buries deep. When Slim, the wise mule driver, questions their relationship, George's terse answers—"He is dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 39)—suggest a loyalty he cannot explain, a silence that Susan Sontag (1967) would describe as "a strategy for survival" (p. 13).

The apex of George's silence comes in the novella's bloody conclusion, where what is not said has become visceral, near tangible. As he repeats the dream for the last time by the river — his voice was monotonous, had no inflection (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 106) — the gunshot which follows is a voiceless requiem, another mute act to wallow in moral uncertainty.This silence reflects Hemingway's iceberg theory, in which the unsaid is more significant than the uttered (Baker, 1972, p. 117), and compelling readers to struggle with George's motivations—mercy or murder? Peter Lisca (1958) frames it as "George's supreme sacrifice, unarticulated yet understood" (p. 78), a silence that carves his character in shades of love, loss, and quiet heroism. Here, Steinbeck transmutes George's reticence into an echoing song, a tribute to the efficacy of silence.

Lennie Small: The Silence of Innocence and Tragedy

We make the transition from George's protective immobility to Lennie Small, whose silence sings another song — one of innocence accompanied by a hint of menace. His speech, a recursion of a refrain — "Tell about the rabbits, George" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 13) — constitutes a frail bridge across the chasm of his inarticulateness. This chant occupies the space left vacant by thoughts too lavish to pass through the gates of his cerebral economy. This point is made beautifully by Eiko Aoshima (2008): "Lennie's silence serves to intensify his loneliness,

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e-ISSN: 2721-4540

making him a tragic figure." His silence is a tabula rasa, open to projection — George's tenderness, Candy's sympathy, Curley's derision — but it has an understated force, making him both lovable and mysterious (p. 112).

This silence is amplified even more in moments of rupture, when Lennie's limited understanding clashes upon the impact of his actions. As he mourns for his dead puppy — "Why do you have to get killed?" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 85) — his words are lost in a whisper, silence more vocal than all explanations. The murder of Curley's wife is the high point of this muteness: "I done a bad thing" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 91) is a stammering confession, a whisper of guilt without understanding. Jackson Benson (1984) calls this "his tragedy, a barrier to understanding his own strength" (201), and Richard Astro (1970) sees Lennie as "the silence of the powerless, a mute victim of a hard world" (p.45). Together, these readings shape Lennie as a person caught in a web he cannot name, his muteness a strand that tangles innocence to ruin.

George's chosen silence is a restraint, while Lennie's is a cage, an involuntary shroud that traps him in a world he cannot navigate. His withdrawal to the river in the last act, cloaked in silence, is a prologue to his demise — a silent elegy that emphasizes his pathos. As John Timmerman (1986) writes, "Steinbeck blends realism and symbolism with silence" (p. 98), and it is in Lennie that this blend finds its starkest expression, his unspoken innocence reflecting the tragedy at the heart of the novella.

Curley's Wife: The Silence of Erasure

Stepping Emerging from Lennie's innocent void, we meet Curley's wife, whose silence is a chain wrought of the unbending iron of her universe. Rae floats through the ranch as a ghost; her words are a whisper consumed by the din of male contempt. When Crooks, in another moment of indignation, snaps, "You got no rights comin' in a colored man's room" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 80), it is one of many echoes of her dismissal; her existence exists in a silence that determines her world, one that she cannot have a place in. However, she resists, her confession to Lennie — "I coulda been in the movies" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 89) — a bold seam in the fabric of her enforced silence. Mary Eagleton (1991) interprets this as "a patriarchal structure that denies her agency" (p. 67), a "feminist gaze" that sees her silence as wound and weapon.

This resistance, though, is a brief flicker, extinguished by the gravity of her reality. Her bitterness toward Curley simmers just below the surface, the wish to escape a dream that she would never say out loud. Charlotte Hadella (1995) calls this "a mirror of her powerlessness" (p. 63), a silence that Steinbeck uses to critique the gendered neglect of the time. Her flirtations with the ranch hands — met with suspicion or indifference — register as a muted cry for recognition, a voice straining against the bars of her cage. In telling her story to the only listener, Lennie (her biological mother), it is an inexplicable slip, a breathing of what might have been in a less cruel world. Her downfall is the ultimate undoing, a last act of reverberating import, in which that which never was can be made eternal. Still all "the ache for attention all gone" (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 92) and lying there, Steinbeck makes a picture of peace with a tinge of tragedy, a silence, which Susan Sontag (1967) might call a "strategy for survival" (p. 13) brought to oblivion. Levant (1974) goes further to say that "her silence is her legacy, a testament to the voiceless" (p. 135), an interpretation that emphasizes Steinbeck's insidious condemnation of a culture that wipes out its most defenseless.

Silence in Context: Modernist and Realist Intersections

In weaving these threads into a united tapestry, Steinbeck's dead spaces display a dual lineage, a bridge across the crevasse between realism and modernism. They echo the clipped depths of Hemingway's minimalism (Baker, 1972, p. 117), in which the unsaid has the heft of revelation, and Woolf's unuttered streams, where the quiet flows of thought are left to drift. French (1975) argues these silences are "not passive" (p. 92), a liveliness that Timmerman (1986) connects to "a blend of realism and symbolism" (p. 98). Inspired by the muted lives of Depression-era workers, they rise to modernist heights, delivering a narrative where silence serves as a mirror and a muse.

This interplay is no coincidence — for Steinbeck, craft flourishes in the interstitial space

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

between traditions. His silences embody the social realities of his time — the migrant worker's alienation, the woman's erasure — and celebrate the modern sensibility that dares to address the inexpressible. Steinbeck's characters "live within the interstices of words," Benson (1984) writes (p. 203), a space in which their humanity shines brightest. In so doing, Of Mice and Men turns into a text of immense duality, its silences a chorus that croons of both the corporeal and the ethereal.

CONCLUSION

The silence, prevailing throughout the final stretch of the story, echoes as John Steinbeck's conclusion to *Of Mice and Men*; a harmonic note that reverberates in the brain like the last strand of a sad song. This study has delved well into the marrow of the novella, unveiling the defining nature of silences in making George Milton and Lennie Small the men they are (or are not), and in filling out the character of Curley's wife, whose words rarely matter except to convey the dimensionality of her silence. Silence, here, is not simply the absence of sound; instead, it becomes a thing in itself, a language unto itself, and Steinbeck uses it like the maestro he is, creating the prose equivalent of the chiaroscuro found in so many visual and literary modernist works, a blending of the gutter of the Depression and the metaphysical realms of modernist thought. As we take one step back from this investigation, the ambit and findings of this analysis provide a window not just into *Of Mice and Men* but into the (various) literary networks of Steinbeck's legacy and its traditions, which he both receives and traverses."

While this study is firmly based on three individuals, it still has a wide net to cover the thematic and stylistic threads running throughout Steinbeck's work. George Milton's silence, a stoic bulwark against despair, conceals one who is tethered by duty but broken by the burden of his actions — a silence that swells to a stifled action: Lennie's bloodless death, a morally ambivalent conclusion that echoes with questions that resonate beyond the text of the novel itself, about who and what we are willing to sacrifice to survive. Inarticulateness is the essence of Lennie Small, and his muteness is the tragic shroud that cloaks innocence in vulnerability — a figure with pathetic beauty whose fate underlines how fragile mythic purity is in a world of desolation. Curley's wife, her voice choked by the patriarchal machinery of the ranch, stands for a silence, imposed and resisted, her ephemeral confessions a desperate act of selfhood that resolves instead to an eternal quiet. These interlacing silences weave a narrative thread that connects the personal to the political, the individual to the collective, and effectively sheds light on humanity through what is not said.

These findings confirm that Steinbeck's employment of silence was not a mere embellishment or stylistic flourish, but rather a narrative cornerstone. This technique increases the complexity of his characters and enhances the emotional intensity of the novella. George's unacknowledged burdens turn him into a reluctant hero, his silence a symbol of the silent strength necessary to endure the unendurable. Lennie's dumb inoffensiveness makes him a sort of victim who is not so much to be terrified of but rather feared, his own inarticulateness a reflection of the unauthorized and accidental results of what power can do when set loose. Curley's wife's subdued voice, meanwhile, becomes a critique of gendered erasure, her silence an ominous testament of the multiple deaths wrought by inattention. Taken together, these insights unveil a text that functions on the real estate of a dual register—realist in its representation of the struggles of Depression-era America, modernist in its capacity for fragmentation and the inexpressible—affirming *Of Mice and Men* as a work of immense literary import.

For out in the world beyond this novella, the implications of this analysis radiate outward, calling for a reappraisal of Steinbeck's entire oeuvre. In The Grapes of Wrath, silence highlights the Joads' resilience; in East of Eden, it enfolds the moral ambiguities of the Trask family. The conclusions of this study indicate that silence is a recurrent motif used by Steinbeck, a tool he employs throughout his works to explore deeper meanings of human experience in his literary canon. In addition to these, by placing Steinbeck alongside modernist contemporaries such as Hemingway and Woolf, this study fills an important gap. It challenges us to see

p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540

him not merely as a realist but as a writer with a modernist soul—complexities that deepen our reading of his place in 20th-century literature.

While this inquiry is narrowed, it provides the foundation for future exploration. Comparative studies could follow silence through Steinbeck and Faulkner, whose Southern gothic murmurs counter Steinbeck's Western reticence. Alternatively, a feminist lens might join this analysis to some of the other female figures in Steinbeck's work, deepening our understanding of gender and silence in his narrative universe. Such investigations will promise to build on this foundation, establishing silence as a crucial lens on literary scholarship.

All things considered, Of Mice and Men is not a classic in sightless recovery by default; rather, it is a classic text of wanting, with its silences serving as the connecting thread of our shared narrative and as a reverberation of a million reading and interpreting voices trailing up and down, cross-talking for perseverance and division. As he presents a timeless mirror of the human spirit that resonates well beyond the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck's creativity transforms into this alchemy: absence made presence, quiet made eloquence. This study serves as both an homage and a call to action by exposing these resonances, urging us to listen to the voices that whisper in the quiet once more.

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p-ISSN: 2252-6323
e-ISSN: 2721-4540