

Chapter 1

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* a Symbiotic Narrative of Elegy, Friendship and Context

Elegy, Friendship and Context

The proposed study endeavors to dig into the novella, *Of Mice and Men* authored by John Steinbeck as an elegy of friendship in the light of absurdist perspective. The novelette ends with a note of tragic pessimism and futility of human hopes, dreams and plans to attain perfect happiness and fulfillment in a world which is not only hostile but also is accursed to inevitable doom and destruction. Moreover, the novel features an incredibly unique human bond between the itinerant farm laborer duo George Milton- an intellectually abundant but physically falling short worker and Lennie Small – a giant with brute strength but low-witted blundering companion.

Born on 27th February, 1902 in Salinas, one of the fertile and richest agricultural valleys in California, Steinbeck's bringing up went past absorbing the natural vistas, flora and fauna of his beautiful home town. Furthermore, the iconic American writer grew up closely witnessing the untellable audacity, ordeal and plight massive wretched migrant workers flocking to California for job opportunities and new settlement. Moreover, since the Nobel laureate himself is acknowledged to have gone through similar first-hand experiences in his early life, critics claim the intense reflection and impression of those personal undergoing and perceptions in some of his greatest works such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* and *In Dubious Battle*.

The novelist, on the other hand, is viewed as never as a true chronicler but a litterateur prioritizing only on his literary artistry and intentionally de-historicizing the catastrophic American crises in the 1930s, albeit he is best regarded for picking

historical, social, moral and human issues in some of his prominent fictions.

Laid in the brief setting of California ranch against the backdrop of both economically and ecologically ravaged America through the 1930s, the story is almost narrated by third person narrator begins with the entry of a thirsty and exhausted main characters duo George Milton and Lennie Small reaching a still and scummy pool near the bank of Salinas river which flows along the base of Gabilan mountain. Lennie, upon the sight of the pool, drops his bundle stiff swiftly on the ground and starts drinking water directly from the pool dipping his mouth into it and like a thirsty horse whereas, conscious George despite his thirst doesn't haste to, instead cautions and beseeches Lennie not to do so, for it might be harmful for his companion's health, implying that he really loves and cares about his comrade's health.

Since it is already evening time, they are seen spending that right there talking about their dream farm and planning how they are going see their employer to confirm their job. Having fixed their work on the ranch George and Lennie are seen interacting with many other ranch hands each with their own kind of aspiration, strength, weakness and condition. Then, in the bunk house, the story revolves round characters of various representations of crises-hit era. Slim- a man of his own power, skill and place; Carlson- a hard natured farm hand; Candy, an old desperate worker; Crooks, a representative of segregated black man; Curley, the ranch boss's arrogant and jealous son who is a domineering husband as well; Curley's wife, the only visible female character who represents the women's status in that era. Carlson, overhearing George and Lennie about their dream ranch shows his avid interest to join them in their project.

Then, the plot develops with the mercy- killing of Candy's ancient dog by irritated Carlson propelling the narrative with the conflict between Curley and Lennie,

the story precipitates the accidental murder of Curley's flirtatious wife by fible-minded Lennie in the farm house, which leads to the lynch mob led by avenging Curley along with his posse committatus. Then the plot rises to its climax with amicide of Lennie by George to save him from the potential brutal torturous death of his gullible bosom mate Lennie at the hands of others, which pushes anyone to the edge of disastrous sentimentality. Furthermore, the novella depicts the abject and ill-fated human condition at large culminating in the abrupt collapse of intimate relations between migrant workers and their shared dreams despite their utmost efforts to cherish and materialize them.

Though it is a fact that like any other text, the novella has also been critically over viewed analyzed and interpreted from multiple vantage points rendering myriad concepts, themes and meanings like loneliness, sexism, racism etc. This research attempts to explore the novella prominently as a textual canvas on which one of the saddest laments on slaying of own soul mate is cathartically portrayed. The situation is congruent with absurdist understanding like all human kill what or who they love.

In the panorama of two catastrophic American crises- The Great Depression and The Dust Bowl around the 1930s, the novel zooms in their diverse domino effects and consequences on society, life and well-being of migrant ranch hands. Furthermore, the novella incorporates a wide range of serious social, moral, psychological issues like companionship, racial segregation, gender discrimination etc. However, one of the common themes in American literature since the beginning of nineteenth century is comradeship, which is conspicuously inherent in *Of Mice and Men*. Coincidentally, Steinbeck himself is publicly acknowledged as one of the American authors who celebrated friendship both in life and literature. Therefore, the novelette is an epitome of what might be called the eternal American buddy novel.

Although researchers have conducted avalanches of findings, one more facet that the novella encompasses is not the happy façade of friendship, but the gloomy elevation of human interpersonal relationship. The novella is not a romance of celebrating comradeship but a tragedy resulted from the obliteration of friendship. The study will try to explore how the American crises have affected human relations imagining absurdist human condition in the novel. Furthermore, it also quests the essence of how *Of Mice and Men* is an elegy of friendship.

The novelette is interpreted and analyzed from plural perspectives but definitely it falls in the category of social reality. This study attempts to explore, despite its prominent features of social and moral ethos, how we can consider it as an elegy of friendship. It illuminates the harrowing and pathetic sufferings, hardship and terrible sacrifices that the destitute tramp laborers underwent during the crises-hit era in America. It comprehensively portrays the appalling human ordeal and plight, hope and fight for survival. But more particularly, this study tries to look into the issues that are embedded in the novella are to chart the ground of American novels particularly written over the crises-hit period, to justify Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as a tragedy in the light of absurdist perspective and to unveil how the novelette is an elegy of friendship.

Of Mice and Men is a literary manifesto of multiple repercussions of the economic and ecological disasters in America. Beyond the revelation of the devastation of family, life, dreams and hopes of the people the most significantly, it depicts the obliteration of special individual relationship like friendship.

The study will be based on John Steinbeck's novel as a primary source. Critics' books and journals articles on John Steinbeck will be employed as secondary sources.

Furthermore, the secondary sources will incorporate critical works, journal articles,

reviews, peer reviews, magazines and other relevant reference materials from both print and electronic sources. Ample guidance from teachers, seniors and experts as well as suggestions from colleagues and contemporaries also will be taken into consideration.

The study is an exploration of tragedy in friendship and lamentation for the same. It examines an assertion of emphasizing individual intimate relation on the top of everything by opting Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The major tool will be the theoretical model. Analyzing friendship through analytical writing of Martin Esslin's- The Theatre of the Absurd. Needless to mention that the paradigm of absurdist is too general and vague to fathom as it ranges through several variations from authors to author. The research adopts the absurdist view of Arthur Adamov who advocates that absurdity is that the destinies of all human beings are of equal futility, that refusal to leave and joyful acceptance of life, both lead by the same path, to inevitable failure, total destruction. The Theatre of the Absurd shows the world as an incomprehensible place where the existence of human being is basically tragic and irrational.

Definitely the paradigms of elegy, absurdity and friendship are too vast and vague to elucidate in a single research as such. So, the study will be limited only on the symbolic implication of the elegy being compared to the tragic end of friendship in the novel. To the furthest possible, the research will be based on the domain of absurdist philosophy.

Unarguably, Steinbeck's novella of *Of Mice and Men* is the catch-all representation of then American social realities caused by the harrowing crises. The impacts were both at micro and macro level- individual and social. However, the individual sufferings were equally extreme and beyond imagination. So, the novella is a sad song- an elegy, written in prose based on the sacrificed friendship. The research

will open new insights for the aspiring researchers.

Review of the Literature

The novel earned a wide and high literary acclamation as soon as it came into public existence. It mounted to the top of its publisher's chart as The-Book-of-the-Month pretty soon topping as the best seller. Critics critically dissected, interpreted and reviewed it from a number of literary and theoretical angles reading the book almost with universal enthusiasm. Overwhelmed and impressed by its instant success and popularity, it was even performed on The New York Stage exploiting its exceptional quality of playability given by almost script like language form, and later was adapted to a movie which became so hit that it established Steinbeck as a household name. Recognizing the immense success of the stage performance, it was conferred with the prestigious The New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for 1937, which justifies its worldwide literary and artistic significance, popularity, relevance. Brooks Atkinson asserts, "The supreme virtue of the story, on the stage as well as in print is the lyrical perfection of all these rude materials" (45). The crude language of the novel violates the virtue of conventional language. Most critics lauded the work's clarity and unflinching naturalism.

Regarding Steinbeck's work Steinbeck and Wallsten write:

Regarding the matter of friendship within the story, it gets a lot more interesting when one knows that the author himself has claimed that he himself does not care much about his books, declining that he should intentionally have a strong moral message in any of his works, which is the main target of the majority of the criticism. One of the essential messages however, no matter whether it is essential or not, within the novella is the main importance of friendship or rather the against

loneliness. In 1933 Steinbeck wrote in one of his letters: The fascinating thing to me is the way the group has a soul, a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction and a set of tropism which resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group. (87)

No matter how difficult situations are or how extreme pain is, despite all odds and obstacles, all a man needs in life to make it live worthy and joyful is someone who always stands on your side together accompanying you through the journey. A comrade's company holds the power to convert the hardship into joy and bliss and pain into pleasure and celebration.

If the ultimate and paramount quest of all humans is lasting happiness, nothing or nobody could be more crucial than a genuine and sincere friend or a soul mate. So, it can be argued that Steinbeck's novel is the true depiction of separation and friendship as it ends with the scene of George's reaching the predetermined hide out before the mob and shooting him to save Lennie from being tortured to death by others' hands.

Friendship is a knot between people in which one wills to sacrifice for other and feeling of becoming one entity. Considering Steinbeck's writing and his legendary novella *Ragneidur Halldorsttir* writes:

Steinbeck reminds us that each and every person should be accepted for who they are and be able to live in harmony with others. Migrant ranch workers had to work hard to survive and lived an isolated and lonely life. When dealing with these tough times and uncertainty about the future it was necessary to have someone by your side to count on a true friend who is willing to sacrifice everything for you.

Unfortunately, such friendship does not come easily. (24)

Although friendship and tragic separation are the main themes in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, he also draws a vivid picture of absurdist human condition. The duo's desperate quest and craving for meaningful life is more than enough to make this book a sentimental piece of futile human futile condition.

As Martin Esslin puts it in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* that analyzes the overall nature, features, form and implications of absurdist dramas reflecting the absurdist conditions in the post-world war II era in the west:

The human condition being what it is, with many small, helpless, insecure and unable to fathom the world in all its hopelessness, death and absurdity, the theatre has to confront him with the bitter truth the most human endeavor is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well-nigh impossible, and the world will forever remain in an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives, we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter.

(13)

In a way, absurdism challenges the school of thought that rationality as being the supreme entity to evolve man to a super being, center of universe or the maker of all meanings and the master of his own. The ideas of certainty and almighty are still vague and vain as the events and actions in life are so unpredictable, uncontrollable that they sweep out all plans, dreams and efforts that human beings set. The novella postulates that similar conditions of its main characters.

Definitely the novella's multiple aspects or facets have been explored by a

number of critics and scholars. Yet, the core facet is still to be discovered in the book is the prominence of human bond and their collective aspirations ending tragically in futility. Although according to Aristotle's definition of true friendship might not find the relation between George and Lennie an ideal and perfect one. Aristotle's view on friendship in his work *Nicomachean Ethics* is defined as "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good and alike in virtue." (NP) But, if examined scrupulously, we can feel that the bond between them is of exceptional kind and level. It is obvious that the symbiosis is not solely based on the plan to make the dream farm possible.

Either of them can get another co-worker and companion on the way of life if they wish. For example, we can take Candy whom they meet on the ranch later does not only express his real will to join them in their dream ranch but also honestly offers the overall saving of his life for the partnership. But, for both of them nothing is more essential than the fondness between them. They emotionally are interdependent and complementary.

If it were not so, perhaps George would have parted his way long before to get rid of blundering Lennie time and again. In the first section, George is seen appeasing Lennie who warns George that he would go the hill and live alone in the cave. Human bond is the issue of paramount significance in the novella, which can be easily felt in the words that George says:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place George went on. "With us it ain't like that. We got a future We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit no bar room blowin' in out jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them

other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us. (15)

Similarly, there are places in the novelette where we can see the prominence of the theme of friendship. Upon the discovery of Curley's wife dead at the barn, Candy tries to persuade George to keep on pursuing their joint venture of acquiring the dream farm with him, but heartbroken George declines the offer, which connotes that it was not just the farm alone George coveted in life but it was a goal they dreamt and planned together, which without Lennie he does not want to gain means that he values his companionship more than anything else.

This incident devastates their friendship, dream, life and hope all of sudden leaving everyone on the brink of extreme sentimentality. The ending of the novel with killing of an intimate friend by someone who has dreamt together to find a meaningful life and living creates a tearful situation equals the novel with an elegy – lamentation on the loss someone very close and special shows that life is absurd – irrational, unpredictable and out of harmony.

Outline of the Literature

The chapter first is the introductory part. It deals with the short summary of the dissertation: statement of the problem, objectives, hypothesis, delimitation and so on. It quests mental state of the characters on the basis of their futile behavior and elegiac responses to their relationship.

The second chapter is theoretical frame work. On the basis of Martin Esslin's book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, elegy, friendship, and context as the umbrella term of absurdism, the chapter will discuss over it. It explores the evolutionary dimensions of elegy in relation with human inter- personal relationship and their engagement with their dreams and aspirations interacting with the hostile world, society reflecting

absurdist human condition.

The third chapter is the application part. As the spectator of absurdism, the mental and physical displacement of the characters- George, Lennie, Candy, Crooks, Curley, Curley's Wife etc. will be judged.

The fourth chapter is the conclusion part. Whatever has been written in the thesis is the reflective part of thesis. It covers the whole summery of the dissertation.

Chapter 2

Elegy, Friendship, and Absurdism: Theoretical Framework

Elegy, a Greek derivative into English literature, evolved from its native noun 'elōgos' literally 'to lament', originally refers to a sentimental reflection, usually a lamentation or mourning for the lost or demised beloved including memorial epitaphs, gloomy, and mournful songs on a wide range of subject matters like love, war, death, failure etc. However, a limited sense of a lament for a departed soul, English literature adopted elegy only since the sixteenth century. The primary credit is attributed to John Donne for pioneering the employment of elegy for broader concepts in his elegies written in the early seventeenth century. "The Sea farer", "The Wanderer" and "The Wife's Lament" are the evidential examples of serious meditative verse compiled in the Old Exeter Book, wherein the first person singular narrator vents their personal mournful experiences.

A comprehensive analysis of elegy makes anyone aware that, through ages, it has gone through literary shift, change, modification in its form, content, usage as well as our understanding of it. The earliest elegies were formal, often ceremonious laments, particularly in response to the loss of someone near and dear, although initially the term referred to not to a genre or a subject matter but to a specific verse form, elegy eventually gained a much broader usage as it spread all over the world. Popularity and widespread usage meant that the metrical form gradually mattered less and less, and writing was increasingly identified as elegiac based on subject matter and genre.

M.H. Abrams claims, "after John Donne's poetry temporarily redefined the elegy in the seventeenth century, it began to be limited to its most common present usage: a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person"

(72). A limited sense of a lament in the poetic verse has been connected to the death of a particular person.

On the basis of its form, subject matter and application, traditional elegy is divided into two subtypes i.e. Funeral elegy, Pastoral elegy. Funeral elegy maintained its prominence throughout literary history earning wide popularity and huge success in Early Modern England as a method of exploring mortality and mourning because its structure promotes an urgent, intense exploration of mortality. A particular structure is inherent in the majority of the funeral elegies in which the narrator wails, hails the departed soul, and sums up with sympathy and consolation. This concluding consolation is the unifying part of any elegy that serves as the key factor to address the audience's experience of feeling loss.

Similarly, around the mid- seventeenth century another subtype of elegy called Pastoral elegy rose to the wider fame and usage as a lamentation tool as it served a broader coverage of affect and was not confined merely in occasional topics like funerals. Both the lamenter and the lamented are represented in Pastoral elegy. Often times, the poet mourns for another poet. It is for this reason Pastoral elegy can resemble with funeral elegy even though Pastoral elegy distinguishes itself from funeral one by its unique characteristics. M.H. Abrams' critique on the salient traditional features that are commonly reflected in pastoral elegies reads:

All nature joins in mourning the shepherd's death; the mourner charges with negligence the nymphs or other guardians of the dead shepherd; there is a procession of appropriate mourners; the poet raises questions about the justice of fate, or else Providence, and adverts to the corrupt condition of his own times; there is a closing consolation. (73)

Pastoral elegy is basically associated with the reflection of sentimental connection

with the nostalgic bygone time and ethos through the heavenly conceptualization of nature and classical mythology, which contributes to the canonization of the dead beloved and exalting him to a heroic figure or idyllic symbol. This is what distinguishes pastoral elegy from funeral elegy even if both forms share the same basic structure, which is essential for the integrity and the effectiveness of the elegy, despite having certain dissimilarities in some elements.

Yet, one more latest subtype of elegiac form that evolved and has been widely employed in the world literature the recent time is known as Prose elegy. This evolution is believed to have initiated in mid nineteenth century and gained momentum in the twentieth century, while the American conservationist author like Aldo Leopold was writing his essays on the devastation of the nature and biosphere particularly the Marshland Elegy, which is an evidence and example of prose elegy.

Similarly, around the same time, the renowned Japanese writer Tanizaki Junichiro was also venting his lament on the loss of traditional Japanese arts and ancient technology through his well-known essay "In the Praise of Shadow" which can be considered next evidence of prose elegy.

Elaborating the shift in the form of elegiac focus John Vickery argues, "The twentieth century gradually transformed the elegy into a focus on the diversity of losses occurring in human life and a shaping of new (or different) elegies responses to them. To the death of the individual, the modern elegy added most of forms personal, intellectual, and cultural loss suffered by mankind" (1). English literature in modern era was the most fertile time that witnessed plethora of innovations, explorations and experiments in the overall domains of arts, literature, technology etc.

Modern authors made efforts to develop new experimental techniques to expand and alter the scope and the form of traditional elegy. In support of this notion,

Miles Bent affirms:

This transition occurred in the mid- 1900's, right round the time Leopold was writing, and many of his essays, including "Marshland Elegy" itself, can be viewed as a response to the contemporary experimental techniques to convey elegiac sentiments. Some of the ways modern authors delineate these shifts are to transform the conventional formula of older elegies; the traditional lamentation/praise/consolation structure still usually appears in more recent elegiac works, but frequently in modified or altered ways. (23)

Through this research my claim is that *Of Mice and Men* is a prose elegy through which John Steinbeck portrays the lamentation as a response to the loss and devastation of interpersonal relationship and natural catastrophic human condition that the American people experienced and suffered through the crises-hit era. The novel majorly represents the financial havoc and natural predicament that resulted in culmination of friendship, family, society and country as a whole.

Friendship is defined, interpreted and analyzed from various point of views by several social scientists, anthropologists and researchers. Since the age of Aristotle to Shakespeare until present time, friendship has not lost its overall values and relevance as a way to make life worthwhile. To put it simply, the bond that dovetails individuals, groups, family, society, institutions, countries etc. etc. can be attributed as friendship. It is a combination of several things that keeps the togetherness tight, mutual, unbreakable and blissful. This special relationship survives in all weathers and conditions if it a true one.

Genuine friendship integrates selfless hearts timelessly, selflessly on the journey of life sharing and caring each other every joy, sorrow, pain and pleasure that

come on their way to keep their relationship strong and alive. But, all friends might not be equally mutual, intimate and selfless. Ordinary acquaintances and utility friends also come across in life. Some companionship might be based on the material and toxic foundation, which makes and breaks friends and friendship every moment.

The significance of friendship in a highly materialized consumerist world is beyond imagination. Life and world are livable and meaningful just because there are people living in cordial bond called friendship complementing each other's hope and happiness; sharing the pain and pleasure of life; teaming up to carry out shared goal, vision and dream.

Categorizing friendship into three types i.e. friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure and friendship based on goodness, Aristotle illuminates on the essence and significance of friendship from ethical point of view that perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good and alike in virtue which can be claimed on basis of plethora of researches and studies and their findings that avalanched in the recent times.

Regarding Steinbeck and friendship, the author is acknowledged to have immensely valued friendship throughout both of his literary creation and life. Dr. Susan Shillinglaw opens up her introduction to the text book of *Of Mice and Men*:

John Steinbeck celebrated friendship, both in his life and his fiction.

Before he began to write each morning, he frequently scrawled letters to his friends, and these voluminous pages, many unpublished, map the contours of his life and art. Friendship is the most enduring relationship in his best work. A fact that places him solidly in a long tradition of American writers who send male duos into uncharted terrain. But Steinbeck's vision of camaraderie is less markedly an

escape from marriage, home, and commitment than exploration of the parameters of society and self. (vii)

Steinbeck personally had unbreakable attachment and bond with his friends who became instrumental in shaping and cherishing his writing and literary career by supporting him through various means and ways.

The enduring relationship with editor/publisher Pascal Covici, Thomas Fensch reviews on the book titled, *Steinbeck and Covici: The Story of Friendship* goes as follows:

John Steinbeck's first three books were published by firms that disappeared during The Great Depression. Publisher Pascal Covici read them and decided to publish Steinbeck; first with his own firm, Covice-Friede, then with The Viking Press, where Covici moved, as editor. Steinbeck stayed with Covici from the 1930s until Covici's death in 1964. The hardcover edition of this book was the first publication of their correspondence. Their relationship was complex, intimate and important. Steinbeck published 22 books with Covici as editor/publisher. Steinbeck and Covici was highly reviewed when it was first published, including "The New York Time," and is now considered a seminal book in Steinbeck scholarship. It is a major contribution to American literary biography. (NP)

America is a land of migrants which came to the light and recognition as country just a few centuries back in the world history. Its discovery by Christopher Columbus paved the way for massive migration from different parts of the western world. Surprisingly, England which was considered a land of higher culture and civilization initially used to use America a remote prison to extradite its prisoners as a form of

tough punishment for the dangerous criminals and the prisoners of conscience. several social, cultural, political and trade dynamics, turbulence and waves in the west triggered influx of migrants to America as a land of dream and shelter for people. Therefore, the importance and need of companionship might have been experienced, felt and realized by forefather settlers and many more generations of migrants more than anyone else in the world. So, desire, dearth and importance of companionship may be more intense in general American consciousness.

The term absurd simply means stupid, lack of harmony, weird, crazy, irrational, nonsensical etc. Absurdism as a school of thought or philosophy envisages life meaningfully meaningless entity; universe as a nonsensical realm; man as a rationale species desperately engaged in the futile incessant quest of finding meaning or making sense of his world, life and his ambition. The contradiction between what man expects with efforts and what, at the end, happens to him creates an endless conflict between him and the universe, which ultimately pushes him to the edge of despair, hopelessness, nonsense and futility. This leads man to the feeling of his absurd condition amidst the hostile nature and out of harmony and integrity with the irrational and capricious world.

One of the pioneer names in the field of absurdist philosophy and literature is Albert Camus who believes that meaninglessness is inherent in human life and the world. So, all attempts of human being to search for the meaning is inevitably and inescapably doomed to fiasco. No matter how skillfully and thoughtfully he tries to be provident setting his schemes, dreams and hopes for the lasting happiness and fulfillment of his desires, he ends up with tragic failure and sentimentality. Reality does not happen logically. Consequently, helpless and hopeless man gets stranded at his own intellectual cul-de-sac, for whom, Camus offers two choices- either be a rebel

or suicide.

The terms absurdism and the Theatre of the Absurd are well-nigh interchangeable. The term was given currency by the well-known critics Martin Esslin. The Theatre of the Absurd is deemed to a new form of drama which became vogue in the post war chaotic western world. The avant-garde form of drama defied and denied all conventional norms and values of earlier drama. The plot, the style, the language, the characterization etc. were deviated from the traditional dramas. The Theatre of the Absurd is the externalization of frustration, angst, ennui, crises of faith and abject human condition resulted from the devastating world wars.

Shedding light on the general philosophical concept of The Theatre of the Absurd renowned critic Martin Esslin illustrates:

... If the characters change their personality halfway through the action, how consistent and truly integrated are the people we meet in our real life? And if people in these plays appear as mere marionettes, helpless puppets without any will of their own, passively at the mercy of blind fate and meaningless circumstance, do we, in fact, in our over organized world, still possess any genuine initiative or power to decide our own destiny? The spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time. (5)

There used to be the epochs in which writers and thinkers, through their arts and literature, depicted representation of well-ordered perfect world based religious faith, god and supremacy of human rationale or logical capacity. The assumption that mankind had on their life, world, rationale power divine existence and validity was

sure, certain and unquestionable. But, all these beliefs, faiths and assumptions got shattered by the devastating world wars which compelled westerner to contemplate on the credibility and validity of former notions of human beings. The traumatizing bloodsheds, annihilation of masses of people and property or even civilizations just to gain a little piece of territory made men to doubt the traditional beliefs and faith on world, religion, god and human rationale potential. So, the playwrights like Samuel Becket, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco etc. tried to bring the true mental and physical condition of mankind and the world in the pre and post-world war II era onto the stage.

Yet, one more latest subtype of elegiac form that evolved and has been widely employed in the world literature the recent time is known as Prose elegy. This evolution is believed to have initiated in mid nineteenth century and gained momentum in the twentieth century, while the American conservationist author like Aldo Leopold was writing his essays on the devastation of the nature and biosphere particularly the Marshland Elegy, which is an evidence and example of prose elegy. The ending itself is the prose elegy of the novel.

Chapter 3

Representation of Elegy, Friendship, and Absurdism

The novel *Of Mice and Men* is the depiction of elegiac friendship along with absurdism with the reflection of the major characters, George Milton and Lennie Small. The novel represents the intimate human bond between two dispossessed tramp ranch laborers who not only care and love each other but also share the same dream of someday having their own ranch to bring change, stability, freedom and self-dignity in their abject lives resulted from the economic and ecological disasters that hit America through the 1930s. Both of the characters are interdependent and complementary despite having certain contrasts between them in terms of their physical and mental constructions and dimensions.

The nomadic duo are the ranch laborers who have no alternative than to wander from place to place to find work/job for their survival, but yet, committed and loyal to each other to follow a common dream of having a ranch along with many more household things of their own to ease the ordeals of life. They start a new farm work in a California ranch after they succeed in preventing a possible deadly attack by the people in Weed, who were angered by Lennie's encroaching touch of a little girl's soft dress so as he has a sort of irresistible mania for soft things. Confirming their job hands, both of them keep on planning and discussing about their dream farm land, which is overheard by Candy, a senile, lonely and insecure-feeling farm worker who exposes his avid interest in joining the duo's plan as a new partner. Representative characters of hard nature like Carlson, Curley, the farm owner's despotic son contribute to brew tension or conflict in the novel as Carlson initiates, insists, persuades and carries out mercy-killing of Candy's pet dog, which foreshadows the analogical end of Lennie at the conclusion of the story, whereas cocksure and jealous

Curley preempts a fight with unaware and innocent Lennie who in course of self-defense upon the urging of offended mate George busts Curley's hand.

Besides them, in addition to rarely referred invisible Aunt Clara, low-witted Lennie's assumed guardian, surprisingly there is one and only visible female character, that too, is anonymous and is referred as Curley's wife, which mirrors the status of women in then America, is also a discontent woman haunted by loneliness and imprisoned by the cultural and social limitations constructed by the male, particularly by her jealous husband Curley.

Comparatively, only one character, who seems almost sovereign in terms of his status earned through his aptitude on his job, robust personality and his attitudes towards life and its issues, is Slim—a representation of self-reliant and self-sufficient people in American society. Having mentioned all, one character, that must not be missed is Crooks who holds a kind of cynic views about the dreams shared and cherished by Lennie, George and Candy along with other migrant workers who have also come, worked on the ranch and left the bunk house. He is a representative of colored community; a synecdoche of apartheid, bigotry, angst and aspirations of the colored communities. The common things in almost all active major characters except Slim is that they are going through common problem of loneliness, insecure feeling, isolation etc. but yet, they have a dream and aspiration of their own and desire to bring change in their life situation

While the unexpected conflict between arrogant Curley and Lennie happens, it gives us a candid impression about the possible climax of the story that the final confrontation might take place between Lennie and Curley. Conversely, the narrative precipitates to an unbelievable turn that, instead, Lennie accidentally happens to end the life of Curley's frivolous wife by strangulating in course of his attempt to silence her

as apprehensively starts screaming and tries free herself from his mighty grip as a disastrous result of Curley's wife's attempt of seducing Lennie and encouraging and inviting him to touch her and play with her hair. Encouraged layman Lennie, not knowing the hidden motive of the woman and not having experience and knowledge to tame her hair in the way she desired and expected, started stoking it roughly as he had an in-birth fondness of soft and delicate things or material. Then it is Curley who first sees the corpse of Curley's wife and frantically informs George and after a while the rest of the ranch people arrive at the spot and

Yet, one more latest subtype of elegiac form that evolved and has been widely employed in the world literature the recent time is known as Prose elegy, which is one of the main focuses of this research and enormously contributes to analyze Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* for its intense sentimentality and mourning for the loss of incredibly unique friendship. In their endeavor to generate more refined reflection of human emotion and portrayal of response to death and loss, modern narratives and other literary forms paved the way to switch emphasis from pastoral elegy to prose elegy. This evolution is believed to have initiated in mid nineteenth century and gained momentum in the twentieth century, while the American conservationist author like Aldo Leopold was writing his essays on the devastation of the nature and biosphere, which is an evidence and example of prose elegy.

Through this research my claim is that *Of Mice and Men* is a prose elegy through which John Steinbeck portrays the lamentation as a response to the loss and devastation of interpersonal relationship and natural catastrophic human condition that the American people experienced and suffered through the crises-hit era. The novel majorly represents the financial havoc and natural predicament that resulted in culmination of friendship, family, society and country as a whole.

Friendship is classified into three types- friendship based on utility; friendship based on pleasure; and friendship based on goodness respectively. Aristotle illuminates on the essence and significance of friendship from ethical point of view that 'perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good and alike in virtue', though this perspective might not be compatible to view the adorable relationship between the main characters Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men*, the relationship between men has been the central theme in American literature since the turn of 19th century, which can be claimed on basis of plethora of researches and studies and their findings that avalanched in the recent times. Shedding light on the ethical significance of true friendship Shakespeare long back in the 17th century reminded the world- 'A friend in need is the friend indeed.'

Regarding Steinbeck and friendship, the author is acknowledged to have immensely valued friendship throughout both of his literary creation and life. Dr. Susan Shillinglaw opens up her introduction to the text book of *Of Mice and Men*.

The novelette is a prose elegy of friendship as it abruptly ends with pathetically portrayed hard-to-believe scene of amicide carried out by George not because he wills to rid of Lennie but because he wants to rid Lennie of the imminent lynch against him, which is clearly illustrated the by this portion of conversation right before shooting Lennie at the back:

“Go on,” said Lennie. George raised the gun and his hand shook, and he dropped his hand to the ground again. “Go on,” said Lennie.

“How’s it gonna be. We gonna get a little place..... Lennie turned his head. “No Lennie. Look down there acrost the river, like you can almost see the place.” Lennie obeyed him. George looked at the gun.

There were crashing footsteps in the brush now! George turned and

looked toward them.... “You... an’ me. Ever’body gonna be nice to you. Ain’t gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody nor steal from ‘em.” Lennie said, “I thought you was mad at me, George.” “No,” said George. “No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now..... “Le’s do it now. Le’s get that place now.” “Sure, right now, I gotta. We gotta.”

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and the settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. George shivered and looked at the gun, and then he threw it from him, back up on the bank, near the pile of old ashes But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had thrown the gun away (104-105).

In a way, the killing of Lennie, which is analogical to the killing of Candy’s old dog was not the act guided by hatred, selfishness and jealous, instead, being trapped in critical situation, it was only way, he believed could save Lennie from brutal and torturous death at the hand of revengefully annoyed Curley and his ranch men, which would be unbearably painful for George, for he loved his more than anyone else.

More important fact not to be forgotten is that how George behaves or his mental and physical response and condition after shooting Lennie. He shivers with extreme guilt and agony, looks at the gun and throws it away. It’s apparent that he is not happy at all with what he did. He knows it’s not only his bosom mate he has lost but all the sweet dream they had together also gone forever. Therefore, this

shockingly sentimental lamentation is represented through the tragic ending of the novel, thereby the novelette is an elegy of friendship.

Looking into the entrapment that compels George to do what he could not even imagine illustrates how absurd human life and the world is. Both Lennie and George hopefully had painstaking to make their dream come true. In a sense, by accepting a new partnership request and offer of huge amount from Candy, they were well-nigh close to their goal of purchasing their own piece of land and settle life to live independently with dignity. But, the event all of sudden takes tragic turn and all their beautiful hopes and strenuous efforts go futile- life is absurd- an epitome of absurdist human condition reflected in *Of Mice and Men*.

The novella is fundamentally a portrayal of the prominence of friendship and its harrowing loss deteriorating the condition of migrants in America, thereby forcing them to carry on same bindle stiffs desperately without hope and happiness and improvement in their poor condition. This is clearly implied when George declines Candy's suggestion after finding Curley's wife dead at the barn as saying:

Now Candy spoke his greatest fear. "You an' me can get that little place, can't we, George?" "You an' me can go there an' live nice, can't we George? Can't we?" ... George didn't answer his question. George said, I'll work my month an' I'll take my fifty bucks an' I'll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I'll set in some poolroom till ever' body goes home. An' then I'll come back an' work another month an' I'll have fifty bucks more. (93)

The bond between George and Lennie is not based on material benefits. Had he not valued it that much he would have easily accepted Candy's proposal and settled rest of his life comfortably without Lennie with less troubles, tensions and issues. But, it's

Lennie and with him he intently shared and cherished the dream of a well-off life as there existed some true spiritual and mutual connection in-between and he kept it on the top of everything in life.

Now, without Lennie no dream, no big aspirations. Broken, lonely, aimless and empty, missing his bosom buddy he is determined to choose living the hard life of a ranch hand rather than settle down to life on 'fatta of lan'' with Candy. George can have a better life, he gives it up, though. For sure, he is going to face more misery on the streets, having no Lennie, than on the farm, without Lennie. Their entire plans, efforts and hardship to build a meaningful life come to a complete failure. This bizarre and contingent situation of these major characters in the novella resembles with what the goes in the Theatre of the Absurd, in general.

The syntactic use of the novel itself is absurd it is because the incorrect use grammatical terms and conditions. It seems that the writer has shown his mental state through his language. Whatever comes in his mind is reflected through his language. Language is the depiction of an absurd feeling of the character as the mouth speaker of the writer. As language is the vehicle of message delivery, "I seen her give Slim the eye. Slim's a jerkline skinner. Hell of a nice fella. Slim don't need to wear no high-heeled boots on a grain team. I seen her give slim the eye. Curley never seen it. An' I seen her give Carlson the eye." George pretended a lack of interest. "Looks like we was gonna have fun." (29). The language employed in the novella breaks all the grammatical conventions and limitation creating a bizarre and chaotic structures which is one of hallmarks of the absurdist nature of language. Furthermore, it is the traumatic disorder of narrator's mind as a consequence of tragic separation of two friends.

The language is opacity, the misleading nature of language and grammar; for

if all our thinking is in terms of language, and language obeys what after all are the arbitrary conventions of grammar. One must strive to penetrate to real content of thought that is masked by grammatical rules and conventions. Here, too, then is a matter of getting behind the surface of linguistic clichés and of finding reality through the breakup of language.

“You God damn tramp.” he said viciously. “You done it, di’ dnow, n’t you? I s’pose you ‘re glad. Every’s body knowed you’d mess things up. You was not no good. You ain’t no good now you lousy tart.” He sniveled and his voice shook. “I could of hoed in the garden and washed dishes for them guys.” He paused, and then went on in a singsong. And he repeated the words: “if they was a circus or a baseball game we would of went to he... jus’ said ‘ta hell with work,’ an’ went to her. Never ast nobody’s say so. An’ they’d of been a pig and chickens.... An’ in the winter.... the little fat stove...an’ the rain comin’... an’ us jus’ settin’ there.” (94)

Although the broken sentences and unconventional structure and incomplete and misspelt words look senseless, the content of what the character Candy means to say is almost understandable and perceivable, which is one of the components of Absurdism or the Theatre of the Absurd. Worried and sure to be laid off sooner or later just because of old age Old Candy another lonely and isolation-haunted character in search of companionship or partner to make sense of his existence and identity, but now he realizes his dream is never going to come true.

From the beginning to the end of the storyline, the novella demonstrates a praise, gloom and consolation pattern of description, dialogue and actions, use of images in nature, like the content of an elegy, and chapters are woven together in a

way that leaves the reader with a deep sense of loss, despair, and grief that is typical in elegies:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to t...
the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, ... debris of the winter's
walked heavily, dragging his feet like a little, the way a bear drags his
paws... His huge companion... and flung himself down and drank
from the surface of the green pool: drank with long gulp, snorting into
the water like a horse. (3-4)

The use of images such as water, pool, river, vegetation, sources of light, and emblems drawn from a natural world such as mountain, hills, outbreak of anger, criticism etc. employed in the text above are supportive to assume the novel as an elegy.

Throughout the novel, at couple of places and times that anger and praise of Lennie by George and vice versa can be seen:

“So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you’re a crazy bastard!” ... O.K. I’ll tell you ya again. I ain’t got nothing to do. Might jus’ as well spen’ all my time tellin’ you things and then you forgot ‘em, and I tell you again.” “The hell with the rabbits. That’s all you ever can remember is them rabbits. O.K.!

Now you listen and this time you got to remember so we don’t get in no trouble. (6)

It is the convention of pastoral elegy that the speaker expresses sudden burst of anger and other emotions while mourning. So, George as the speaker expresses his irritation given to him by the trouble that Lennie makes by forgetting things soon.

Praise is another element that the speaker of an elegy includes while making

the lamentation on the lost beloved or things:

Used to play joke on ‘im Made me seem God damn smart alongside of him ... never got mad at about it ... and coulda bust every bone in my body jus’ ... but never lifted a finger against me... “He is nice fella.” “Guys don’t need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me it jus’ works the other way around.(41)

In the novel, George and Lennie are selflessly dedicated, loyal, honest, and forgiving each other they always admire and adore their intimate friendship:

Consolation is another idea that is embedded in an elegy in certain part as a response to the experience of failure, loss, and departure, “Never mind,” said Slim . “A guy got to sometime.” ... Slim twitched George’s elbow, “Come on, George. Me and an’ you’ll go in an’ get a drink” (105-106). Completely broken heart and hopeless George after killing his bosom mate by himself knows nothing what to do next. Meanwhile, he is consoled by Slim.

Chapter 4

The Tragic End of Friendship with an Elegy

The thesis represents the novel as an elegy of friendship in the light of absurdist perspective. The novelette ends with a note of tragic pessimism and futility of human hopes, dreams and plans to attain perfect happiness and fulfillment in a world which is not only hostile but also is accursed to inevitable doom and destruction. From the start to the end of the novel, the characters revolve around their dreams, hopes, angst and plights, and quest of companionship and reflect their actions accordingly. Moreover, the novel features an incredibly unique human bond between the itinerant farm laborer duo George Milton- an intellectually abundant but physically falling short worker and Lennie Small – a giant with brute strength but low-witted blundering companion.

Though it is a fact that like any other text, the novella has also been critically over viewed myriad concepts, themes and meanings like loneliness, sexism, racism etc. It investigates the novella prominently as a textual canvas on which one of the saddest laments on slaying of own soul mate is cathartically portrayed. The absurd feeling developed in the mind of the George is panoramic example of futile behavior and its reaction. The situation is congruent with absurdist understanding like all human's kill what or who they love, which is what this study essays to research in the novel crisscrossing the terms elegy and absurdism.

Definitely the paradigms of elegy, absurdity and friendship are too vast and vague to elucidate in a single research as such. So, the study will be limited only on the symbolic implication of the elegy being compared to the tragic end of friendship in the novel. To the furthest possible, the research is based on the domain of absurdist philosophy.

Unarguably, Steinbeck's novella of *Of Mice and Men* is the catch-all representation of then American social realities caused by the harrowing crises. The impacts were both at micro and macro level- individual and social. However, the individual sufferings were equally extreme and beyond imagination. So, the novella is an elegy, written in prose based on the tragic end of an intimate friendship between two migrant workers who worked together, dreamed together and shared everything with each other forgiving, understanding, trusting and relying on each other's flaws and fortes.

The novel mirrors the myriad repercussions in the crises-hit American society, life and well-being of migrant ranch hands. Furthermore, it incorporates far and deep going social, moral, psychological issues like companionship, racial segregation, gender discrimination etc. Yet, one of the common themes in American literature since the beginning of nineteenth century is comradeship, which is conspicuously inherent in *Of Mice and Men*. Coincidentally, Steinbeck himself is publicly acknowledged as one of the American authors who celebrated friendship both in life and literature. Therefore, the novel features the fragmentation of human relationship due to their absurdist factors of society and the world.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2005. Print.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "The Play John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in a Production Staged By George." New York: The New York Times, 1937. Print.
- Bent, Miles. *Unique Elegy: Consolation and agency in Maeshland Elegy and a sand County Almanac*. Washington: Lee University Press, 2017. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." The Tulane Drama. Massachusset: The Mit Press, 1960. Web. 29 March 2019.
- Fensch, Thomas. "Steinbeck and Covici: The story of a Friendship" *Western American Literature*. 15.2, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. Print.
- Halldorsdottir, Ragnheiour. "John Steinbeck's Portrayal of the Life of Migrant Ranch Workers in 1930s America." *Moral Issues, Loneliness and Friendship in of Mice and Men*. Iceland: University of Iceland. 2017. Print.
- Rudying, Jacob. "Perfect Friendship is the Friendship between Men Who Are Good and Alike in Virtue." *Aristotle's Views on the Friendship*. 2012. Web. 23 March 2019.
- Steinbeck, E and Wallsten. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letter*. London: The Viking Press. 1975. Print.
- Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.